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"SHOULDER TO SHOULDER FOR A COMMON CAUSE?:" JEWISH, ITALIAN, AND BLACK WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS IN NEW YORK CITY, 1900-1930

BY

DANA CHRISTINE MASSING ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and
Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts.

IN

HISTORY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND CLASSICS

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1995

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "'Shoulder to Shoulder For a Common Cause:' Jewish, Italian, and Black Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1900-1930" submitted by Dana Christine Massing in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History.

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on women in the New York garment trades early in the twentieth century has largely focused on Jewish women as strong labor activists, while ignoring the participation of Italian and black women in union activities. This thesis argues that union organizers and employers perceived many cultural differences between Jewish, Italian, and black women because they spoke different languages and came from different countries. In reality, however, there were many parallels in their experiences in the workplace and in their day to day lives as shaped by the fact that they were working-class women.

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Chapter I: *Introduction*

The garment trades in New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century were characterized by an abundance of immigrant workers, mainly women, laboring under poor working conditions for low wages. The composition of the shirtwaist industry (later the blouse industry) reflected the demographics of the garment trades as a whole. Eighty percent of the workers were women and, in total, fifty-five percent of workers were Russian Jews, thirty-five percent were Italians, and seven percent were "Americans" or native-born workers from a variety of backgrounds.

Eastern European Jews began to immigrate to the United States in large numbers in the 1880s, mainly due to religious persecution in their homelands. The last of these great migrations was in the first decade of the twentieth century as a result of the failed 1905 revolt in Russia. Beginning in the 1880s Italian men also migrated to the United States hoping to earn enough money to raise their standards of living.[1] Italians did not immigrate in substantial numbers, however, until the turn of the century when more men came to seek their fortunes, sometimes earning enough to bring over their wives and children. First Jewish immigrant women then Italian women found positions working within the various garment trades in New York City. At the beginning of World War I, the makeup of the workforce shifted as Jewish and Italian immigration tapered off and black women, mainly immigrants from the West Indies, slowly found positions as garment workers. By the early 1920s, more black women entered the garment trades, but a number of these women had migrated from the South. Although the workers changed, the conditions under which they worked improved very little over the same time frame.

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[1] Many contemporary writers discussed how Italians were motivated to come to New York by the promise of earning more money. See Charlotte Adams' 1881 article, "Italian Life in New York," *The Italians: Social Backgrounds of An American Group*, edited by Francesco Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1974).

The garment trades were divided in terms of wages between the skilled male workers, working as cutters or pressers, and the unskilled female workers, who were generally machine operators or finishers. Among the unskilled workers, the "learners" of the trade, who composed thirty-seven percent of the industry, earned two-fifty to four dollars a week; and the more experienced unskilled workers sometimes earned as much as nine dollars a week.[2] The wages also depended on whether the worker did week work, in which they were paid the same rate regardless of their output, or piecework, in which their pay was determined by the number of garments they produced. Piecework was highly desirable to experienced and quick workers, but created conflicts among the workers because they fought over who would receive the largest bundles of work. Manufacturers likewise used the system to favor certain workers by giving them more work, thus producing petty jealousies. Those shops who relied upon the subcontracting system tended to pay less because the employer would contract work with a foreman who would, in turn, hire up to eight workers, usually "learners." Therefore, two sets of employers would supervise the workers and profit from their labors. Not surprisingly, workers considered the subcontracting system to be especially oppressive.

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[2] Dr. Woods Hutchinson, "The Hygienic Aspects of the Shirtwaist Trade," *Survey*, 2 January 1910, 395. The wage rates quoted were for 1909-1910.

The hours varied seasonably, depending on the demand for the goods, and during slack seasons, workers had to survive often with no savings to draw upon. While employers estimated the slack season to be only 2.6 months out of the year, workers claimed that they had little or no work for 3.5 months out of the year.[3] The workers put in long hours--from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. in better shops--which left them in a constant state of physical exhaustion. During the busy season, though, it was not uncommon for workers to toil for more than twelve hours a day, six or seven days a week. Workers complained, as well, that employers often changed the clocks in order to more efficiently cheat them of part of their breaks or to have them work late. Some workers objected to being followed to the washrooms by their supervisors who would hurry them back to their machines as quickly as possible, ensuring that they did not waste time socializing with other workers.

Each worker also had to pay for necessities for work, as well as being fined for various offenses, out of their paltry wages. Employers would charge the workers for the electricity, thread and needles that they used in the course of making the garments, sometimes as much as $1.50 a week. Workers paid their employers for "privileges," such as the use of a chair or a hook or a locker for their coats and hats, or for water to drink. As well, if workers accidently spoiled a piece of cloth or came a few minutes late for work, they were fined.[4] Many women were also expected to purchase their own sewing machines, usually on an installment plan. These costs all diminished the actual wages which the workers received.

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[3] Pearl Goodman and Elsia Ueland, "The Shirtwaist Trade," *The Journal of Political Economy* 18 (December 1910): 817.

[4] Louis Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union* (New York: B.W. Huebsch Inc., 1924), 147.

The conditions under which the workers toiled were poor and contributed to a great number of health problems. The shops themselves were extremely hazardous, as the weight of the workers and machinery combined to weaken the floors, sometimes to the point of collapse. Fires often broke out in the factories due to the flammability of the cloth and the oil on the machines. Workers frequently could not escape as employers locked the doors to prevent theft and provided inadequate fire escapes, as was the case in the famous Triangle fire in 1911. The workrooms had few, if any, windows therefore there was no source of ventilation to provide fresh air to the workers, and the shops were dimly lit by artificial lights. Workers were crowded into workrooms so heavily that often for one woman machine operator to leave her seat, all the others had to rise to let her pass. All sewing machines were required by state law to have a board to protect the operator from having her skirt dragged into the machinery, but many employers failed to provide these skirt guards.[5] The majority of women suffered under a continual parade of illnesses, but could not afford to take time off to allow their health to improve. One woman, for example, had been diagnosed with tuberculosis, but escaped from the sanatorium and the nurse later found her back working in the factory from which she had been removed.[6] Clearly these women workers needed to be unionized to protect them from such exploitation.

There were several obstacles to organizing women garment workers. One barrier to the unionization of Jewish and Italian women garment workers was the employers themselves. Women were seen by employers as expendable and exploitable workers because they were unskilled and could be paid less than men. As two contemporaries stated in their 1911 work on women in trade unions: "The moment she organizes a union and seeks by organization to secure better wages she diminishes or destroys what is to her employer her chief value."[7] With a steady supply of immigrant workers, employers were able to replace those who tried to unionize a shop or educate coworkers about unionism. Employers also perceived there to be ethnic and language differences between Jewish and Italian workers. They attempted to hinder cooperation between the groups by placing a Jewish worker next to an Italian worker, using Italian newcomers to the industry to undercut the wages, and creating inequalities in the piecework system. For the most part, though, these tactics would have been unsuccessful if women workers had been accepted into the unions.

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[5] Elizabeth Beardsley Butler, *Women and the Trades* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1909; New York: Arno Press, 1969), 108.

[6] Mary Van Kleeck, "Working Hours of Women in Factories," *Charities and the Commons*, 6 October 1906, 17.

The major obstacle to unionizing women was not the employers, but labor union officials themselves who believed that women were temporary wage earners incapable of sustaining a union. Women's work was to be, in the eyes of society, in the home. Samuel Gompers, who was head of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), articulated this common sentiment: "Women had a right to work ... but they should not exercise it unless necessary, for their greatest contribution to society was as the centre of the home in their noble role as mother."[8] Moreover, union leaders maintained that women did not actually need to work because they lived with their parents and had no expenses. Instead, working women were seen to be motivated by the desire to earn "pin money" to buy material goods, and to pass the time before they married. The AFL leaders ignored the fact that these women worked to make much needed contributions to the family income. The AFL, then, was a craft union for skilled, male, native born workers with the aim of ensuring that men were paid sufficiently in their work to support their entire family on a single income. The AFL was not interested in the least in unionizing women, especially immigrant women who could not even speak English and did not perform skilled labor.

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[7] John B. Andrews and W.D.P. Bliss, *History of Women in Trade Unions* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 151.

The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) was a small branch of the AFL committed to organizing the men employed in the garment trades through its various locals. The ILGWU was forced to be more liberal than the AFL regarding the issue of organizing women, given the large numbers of women in the garment trades. The ILGWU executive did not recruit women members, but did accept women if they asked to join. The executive agreed with the AFL that men should occupy all positions of leadership within the union. Thus, women workers seeking to unionize faced a great deal of opposition from the union officials themselves.

Union meetings were correspondingly geared towards male workers. Meetings were often held late at night when many women were occupied with household tasks, and in saloons or taverns which reputable women would not be seen in. Theresa Wolfson, a contemporary writer, found that the few actual union halls discouraged all but the hardiest unionists: "... most unions halls or meeting places are dirty and unattractive. The room is filled with smoke, the floors are decorated with bespattered spittoons, the windows are usually closed and the air chokingly foul."[9] Clearly, serious obstacles needed to be overcome to break down these very unrealistic ideas that union leaders held about women workers.

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[8] James Kenneally, "Women and Trade Unions, 1870-1920: The Quandary of the Reformer," *Labor History* 14 (Winter 1973): 45.

The Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) was founded in 1903 to help rectify the fact that women had no voice in the AFL. The aims of the League were to draw women workers into the labor movement to improve the wages and working conditions under which they labored, and to form an egalitarian cross-class alliance between working women and the upper and middle class "allies" who constituted the executive of the League.[10] The allies were products of the Progressive era, which stressed the importance of creating order within the chaos created by industrialization, urbanization, and population growth caused by mass immigration. These women embraced the task of reforming the ills facing society out of the desire to be socially useful outside of the home. As Rheta Childe Dorr wrote: "... I for one wanted to get out into the world of real things."[11]

The League took several years to get its work fully underway due to the massive task which confronted it. Based on the needs of workers, the WTUL adopted a platform which advocated, in part: an eight hour day, a minimum wage, equal pay for equal work, and the organization of workers into unions.[12] The League members were split, however, on whether to concentrate on educating workers about trade unions, or to actually embark upon the task of organizing workers. Meanwhile, the general discontent of male and female workers alike rumbled throughout the garment trades beginning in 1907. Women workers began to mobilize themselves into informal groups to discuss how they would deal with the terrible conditions and wages to which they were subjected. Spontaneous walk outs, generally involving only one shop, increased in frequency and League members stepped in to assist the strikers.

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[9] Theresa Wolfson, *The Woman Worker and the Trade Unions* (New York: International Publishers, 1926), 167.

[10] Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and As Sisters: Feminism, the Labor Movement, and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980), 1.

[11] *Ibid.*, 25.

The shirtwaist makers' strike in 1909 represented a significant turning point for League organizers and working women alike. The strike has achieved a prominence in American labor history as the first large scale women's strike in the country, with somewhere between 25,000 and 40,000 strikers. Moreover, the strike was called and sustained by working-class immigrant women, as opposed to the WTUL or the ILGWU. The strike was also significant in providing the only well-documented example of interactions between Jewish, Italian, and black women. Finally, the shirtwaist strike was the first general protest in the New York garment trades, drawing in workers from all shirtwaist shops. Workers in many of the other garment trades in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia were inspired by the success of the shirtwaist strike. These workers launched themselves into three years of intense labor activism, which resulted in a series of massive strikes. These subsequent strikes more or less followed the same basic course of events as the shirtwaist makers' strike, thus it was a model for future labor disputes.

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[12] Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement From Colonial Times to the Eve of World war I* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 304.

Beginning in July 1909, workers in the Rosen Brother's shirtwaist factory had mobilized themselves to strike for better wages. By the end of September, this strike had spread to the Triangle Shirtwaist Company because the owners locked out a number of workers who were suspected of being union sympathizers, and to Leiserson's where non-union women operators insisted upon joining male unionists in their planned strike. These strikes were characterized by intimidation and violence on the part of employers which set the pattern of events for the eventual general strike. Leiserson's used hired thugs to harass and assault the strikers, while the Triangle hired prostitutes to cheapen the reputations of picketers by association.

The tiny local 25 of the ILGWU held a meeting on November 22 to discuss the strikes already in progress at these three large shops. At the climax of the meeting, a Jewish shirtwaist worker named Clara Lemlich, already struggling against her bosses at Leiserson's, called for the motion to strike. The chairman then asked the two thousand people at the meeting to take an adapted version of an old Jewish oath: "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise."[13] The next day, twenty-five thousand workers, eighty percent of them women, walked out of the shops and gathered at the ILGWU headquarters. Their major demands were for a fifty-two hour work week, elimination of the petty fines and the charges for supplies and electricity, abolition of the subcontracting system, and recognition of the union.

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[13] Sue Ainslie Clark and Edith Wyatt, "Working Girls' Budgets: The Shirtwaist Makers and Their Strike," *McClure's* 36 (February 1911), 81.

The WTUL was instrumental in directing the strike since the ILGWU lacked the organizational skills, numbers, and resources to render much aid. The ILGWU executive was, in fact, overwhelmed by the swarms of women streaming in to join because they had four dollars in the treasury and less than a hundred members when the strike was called. The ILGWU executive did little more than issue a pamphlet entitled "Rules for Pickets" to help the strikers avoid arrest, and eventually negotiated an end to the strike, while the strikers and the allies carried out all practical aspects of the strike. The WTUL organized meetings, made speeches to increase public support for the strike, raised funds for the strikers, and could often be found on the picket lines. The President of the New York WTUL, Mary Dreier, also brought the earliest major publicity to the Triangle strike when she was arrested on the picket line and called a "dirty liar" by the officer, which was subsequently reported in the *New York Times*, among other periodicals.[14] It should come as no surprise that the work of male organizers was highly praised by contemporary writers. The official history of the ILGWU, while giving due credit to the WTUL, maintains that the men in Local 25 planned every aspect of the strike from the moment they made the decision to strike.[15] This interpretation is rather strange since the executive of the ILGWU planned a meeting in which to discuss the possibility of a general strike, but hesitated to take any action until Clara Lemlich called the strike. Mary Dreier, the New York League President, consequently fumed about Local 25, "These men get me so mad, they treat us like two cents."[16]

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[14] *New York Times*, 5 November 1909, 1.

[15] See Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 151-167.

Upper class women, who were referred to by the press as the "Mink Brigade," drew upon their financial resources to help strikers and used their influence in society to promote the aims of the strike. Alva Belmont, a prominent society member and suffragist, for example, spent her evenings in district night court bailing out strikers and arguing on their behalf. She also organized and financed a huge meeting at the Hippodrome on December 5, 1909 which was packed with strikers and their supporters who listened to speeches by Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, a suffrage activist, Leonora O'Reilly from the WTUL, and Rose Pastor Stokes from the Socialist Party. Anne Morgan, daughter of millionaire J.P. Morgan, was also active in fundraising and picketing and headed a movement to form a million dollar cooperative shirtwaist factory staffed by union labor.[17] College students from Columbia, Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, and Vassar could also be found on the picket lines. Carola Woerishoffer, a Bryn Mawr graduate, was prominent among college women for her contributions because she posted her home as bail for the strikers and assisted them each night in court. A meeting at the Colony Club on December 15, 1909 brought together four hundred of New York's wealthiest women to hear the stories of a group of strikers, including Clara Lemlich who remained at the strike's forefront. After listening to tales of the hardships endured by the strikers, these women contributed thirteen hundred dollars between them to the strike effort.[18]

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[16] Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and As Sisters*, 97.

[17] *New York Evening Journal*, 11 January 1910, 2.

[18] These contributions were seen as woefully insufficient by a number of members of the press, the WTUL, and the Socialist Party because these women were extremely wealthy, yet

Despite the work of these middle and upper class women, it was largely the tenacity of the strikers themselves that sustained the strike. These women endured, while picketing, starvation, terrible weather conditions, and insults from members of the public and from policemen, who often referred to the women as "streetwalkers." The New York *Times* wrote that one striker had been insulted by an officer and pinched until she was black and blue and "When she remonstrated, he declared that if she said anything further he'd shoot her down like a dog."[19] The *New York Call* reported that pickets were beaten up daily by the police.[20] Clara Lemlich, for example, was arrested seventeen times during the strike and was nursing six broken ribs at the time she called for the general strike. Many incidents occurred whereby a striker was abused by "thugs" employed by the shop owners, especially a man named "Dominick" who was notorious in the press for his ruthless treatment of strikers. Strikers and strikebreakers were often engaged in altercations on the picket lines, mainly verbal. The press seized upon the idea that ethnic tensions between Jewish strikers and Italian strikebreakers were the cause of these conflicts and, although Italian women were quite active in the strike effort, the label of "scab" was often applied to them. Black women were also recruited as strikebreakers in small numbers despite pleas from the WTUL to support the cause of the union.

The disdain that public officials felt towards the strikers can be seen in the words of District Judge Olmstead who told one striker that she was "On strike against God and

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they only gave an average of three dollars each to the cause.

[19] *New York Times*, 22 December 1909, 8.

[20] *New York Call*, 1 December 1909, 1.

Nature, whose firm law is that man shall earn his bread by the sweat of his brow."[21] Most judges thought similarly, and sentenced strikers to a workhouse on Blackwell's Island rather than fining them. Rosa Perr, who was sixteen years old, was sentenced to thirty days in prison, despite the protests of Rose Schneiderman and Mary Dreier of the WTUL:

> We asked if he realized what it would mean to a girl her age to be locked up with prostitutes, thieves, and narcotics addicts. "Oh," he said, "it will be good for her. It will be a vacation."[22]

Mayor McClellan was also decidedly disinterested. At a march on December 3, 1909 on City Hall to protest the treatment of the strikers by the police, he promised to speak to Police Commissioner Baker so that they would get a "fair deal."[23] When asked to speak at the Hippodrome meeting, however, he said that he "was not interested in 40,000 women out on strike and expected to be out of town."[24]

The strike was arbitrated on several occasions, but each failed due to the refusal of the representative body of the employers, the Associated Waist and Dress Manufacturers, to recognize a union shop. By February 15, though, the strike was called off after settlements had been reached in most shops. The success of the strike sent the message to union officials that women could be competent labor organizers and strikers. Clara Lemlich summed it up most effectively when she said: "They used to say that you couldn't even organize women. They wouldn't come to union meetings. They were 'temporary' workers.

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[21] *New York Times*, 6 January 1910, 5.

[22] Rose Schneiderman with Lucy Goldthwaite, *All For One* (New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1967), 93-94.

[23] *New York Times*, 4 December 1909, 20.

[24] *Ibid.*, 1.

Well, we showed them!"[25]

Contemporary writers rarely focused specifically on the lives of these Jewish and Italian women, however, apart from their roles in the shirtwaist strike and the general conditions faced by women workers. Some periodicals did have general articles on Jewish and Italian immigrant life, such as *Charities and the Commons* and the *Survey*, social welfare publications, and the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Louise Odencrantz conducted an extensive study of Italian women, *Italian Women in Industry*. She interviewed over a thousand Italian working women and five hundred families to discern information about women's work and about the conditions in the workplace, with some discussion of culture and traditions.[26] Memoirs by working women, who later became labor leaders, also provided some information on the lives of immigrant women, but only Jewish women wrote such memoirs.[27] The best primary source is a series of taped interviews conducted in the mid-1970s by the City University of New York with Jewish, Italian, and black women who formerly worked in the garment trades. These interviews were first used in the mid-1980s when researchers on women's history began to study ethnicity.[28]

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[25] Paula Scheier, "Clara Lemlich Shavelson," *Jewish Life* 8 (1954), 8.

[26] Louise Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry* (New York: Arno Press, 1919).

[27] See, for example, Rose Schneiderman's autobiography, *All For One*. Michael Gold also wrote an account of his life growing up in a New York tenement, *Jews Without Money*, which has a great deal of information about his mother's life (New York: International Publishers, 1930).

[28] These interviews were conducted by the Oral History Project of the City University of New York, directed by Herbert Gutman and Virginia Yans. The interviews are located at the Tamiment Labor Library in the Elmer Bobst Library at New York University. The initial citation of each interview will include the name of the person who was interviewed, the series, and tape number. See also Jennie Masur and Sydelle Kramer, eds., *Jewish*

Initially, writers on immigrants focused on men with little mention of women. The purpose of these early works was to show the success stories of individual men, or the contributions which a particular ethnic group made towards the building of American society and culture as a whole. Later writers began to incorporate women into their studies, to varying degrees.[29] Irving Howe, author of *World of Our Fathers*, for example, gives many glimpses into the lives of Jewish women and men in telling the story of the migration of Eastern European Jews to New York and how they adapted culturally to the New World. Edwin Fenton studied Italians in the labor movement in his Ph.D. thesis, "Immigrants and Unions A Case Study: Italians and American Labor, 1870-1920." His sections on women are riddled with stereotypes and he did not believe Italian women to be as capable of organizing as their Jewish coworkers, seeing them as docile and passive. The majority of Italian women, Fenton maintained, remained at their machines during the strike due to an absence of solidarity, leaders, and community support. His major contribution to the limited scholarship on Italian women is his analysis of the Italian press' reactions to the shirtwaist makers' strike.

The earliest works that concentrated solely on immigrant women were somewhat

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Grandmothers (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976) which contains interviews with ten Jewish women. Marie Hall Ets also wrote a work, *Rosa: The Life of An Italian Immigrant* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), which was based on her interviews with an Italian woman.

[29] See Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Edwin Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions a Case Study: Italians and American Labor, 1870-1920," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1957).

limited. Some writers focused on the "great women," the leaders, rather than the mass of workers. Paula Scheier, for example, wrote on Clara Lemlich, and June Sochen studied Jewish women writers, radicals, and volunteer activists.[30] Other works were written around the same time that City University of New York interviews were being conducted, therefore the authors did not use these interviews. Thus, the experiences of Jewish women were filtered through the eyes of middle and upper class writers and one cannot get a clear idea of what immigrant women thought except for the Jewish women leaders. Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel wrote a collective work entitled *The Jewish Woman in America*, for example, in which they gave an overview of Jewish women's work experiences, and discussed the contributions of Jewish women in the shirtwaist strike, especially the leaders of the movement such as Rose Schneiderman.[31] Rudolf Glanz, author of *The Jewish Woman in America: Two Female Immigrant Generations, 1820-1929* produced an excellent survey of the working lives of Jewish women and their activities in the unions, but again without delving closely into what they actually thought.[32] One of the only works on Italian women at that time was a collection of essays from the tenth conference of the American Italian Historical Association on a variety of topics, including the question of Italian women's labor activism in Italy.[33]

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[30] Paula Scheier, "Clara Lemlich Shavelson;" June Sochen, *Consecrate Every Day: The Public Lives of Jewish American Women, 1880-1980* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).

[31] Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: The Dial Press, 1976).

[32] Rudolf Glanz, *The Jewish Woman in America: Two Female Immigrant Generations, 1820-1929*, vol. 1, The Eastern European Jewish Women (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1976).

In the early 1980s, many historians became interested in studying women, although works on women in labor unions rarely discussed the lives and contributions of immigrant women. The writings on the Shirtwaist Makers' strike are indicative of the content of typical labor histories because the authors examine the strike using gender as the main tool of analysis.[34] The strike was seen as significant mainly because it brought together women from different classes and they were able to cooperate with one another and fight for a common goal. Each author highlights the events of the strike and the contributions of the middle and upper class women and the Jewish strikers. While it was recognized by these authors that the strikers were immigrants, these immigrants were considered more as a class, and as women, rather than as being from distinct ethnic groups with different cultures, languages, and religions. These authors did not deny that ethnicity was important, however, but the scope of their work did not allow for detailed analysis of ethnicity. As well, every historian writing on the strike more or less discounted the contributions of Italian women, with the exception of Maxine Schwartz Seller, who mentioned the fact that Italian women were labor activists in Italy. Even books specifically written on immigrant women showed this bias of discussing Jewish women labor activists and ignoring Italian women.

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[33] Betty Boyd Caroli, Robert Harney, and Lydio Tomasi, eds., *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1978).

[34] See Meredith Tax, *The Rising of Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980); Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*; Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and as Sisters*; Maxine Schwartz Seller, "The Uprising of Twenty Thousand: Sex, Class, and Ethnicity in the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909," in *Struggle a Hard Battle: Essays on Working Class Immigrants*, edited by Dirk Hoerder (Dekalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986); Carolyn McCreesh, *Women in the Campaign to Organize Garment Workers, 1880-1917* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1980).

In the mid-1980s, some researchers began to examine the lives of immigrant women using interviews with these women to place their personal experiences into the larger context of the immigrant experience in New York. Sydney Stahl Weinberg utilized interviews with Jewish women to illuminate their experiences in the workforce and attitudes towards their work, though she did not discuss the strike itself.[35] Susan Glenn, author of *Daughters of the Shtetl*, discussed the lives of Jewish women workers in an attempt to explain why they were so visible in the labor movement.[36] She believed that these women borrowed elements from the Old World, including traditions of women's work such as artisanal pride, and rejected notions of women's inferiority. From American culture, Jewish women admired the fact that women were not considered inferior and that womanhood was idealized and elevated. Thus, Jewish women drew upon Old World and American cultural ideas to form their own identities. The only historical study which focused on Italian women and drew on interviews was Columba Furia's Ph.D. thesis in which she examined the contributions of Italian women to the labor movement.[37] Furia maintained that Italian immigrant women had more difficulties than other cultural groups in processing the new culture with respect to the expectations of their families. Traditional expectations such as docility and obedience and the fact that women considered their work temporary and not as important as men's (despite the fact that some earned more than their fathers and brothers) clashed with militant trade union practices. While some women did rebel, it was only after the shirtwaist strike that Italian men and women began to realize that unionization was necessary and could achieve some gains. Furia's work is thorough, though she could have strengthened her conclusions by utilizing the City University of New York interviews instead of just the interviews which she conducted herself.

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[35] Sydney Stahl Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers: The Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

[36] Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[37] Columba Maria Furia, "Immigrant Women and Industry: A Case Study. Italian Immigrant Women and the Garment Industry, 1880-1950" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1979), 130-133.

Only one author, Elizabeth Ewen, who wrote *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, examined the similarities in the daily lives of Jewish and Italian immigrants on the Lower East Side.[38] By using the City University of New York interviews, she was successful in presenting a more inclusive picture of young immigrant women which complements her small section on the shirtwaist strike. Since Ewen studied all aspects of immigrant life, however, there was little information on women's experiences in the workforce and in unions. She also chose not to study relationships between Jewish and Italian women in the workplace--a question that was specifically asked of the immigrant women that were interviewed. This work can be expanded upon, then, with respect to these areas.

Essentially nothing has been written on black women in the garment trades in New York during or after the strike, perhaps because black women in the North were primarily engaged as domestic servants. Most post-slavery works on working class black women were written about the domestic service. The scarcity of primary sources partly explains the deficiency in scholarship in labor history, though it seems that the material is sufficient to produce an article since a number of studies of black women in industry were conducted between 1919 and 1929.[39] Many periodicals also carried general articles on black people living in New York.[40] Starting in the 1930s, a number of books were published on Northern black workers and their membership in unions. These works contain a trace amount of information on women, but no more than a few pages.[41] Ruth Francis Paul's Ph.D. dissertation in 1940 did explore the area of black women in industry in Philadelphia, but mainly after 1930. In terms of secondary sources, Elizabeth Pleck wrote a more general comparison of married, wage-earning black and Italian women in which she analyzed why black women were more likely to keep working than Italian women.[42] Rosalyn Terborg-

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[38] Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), 16.

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[39] See, for example, United States Department of Labor Women's Bureau, *Negro Women in Industry*, report prepared by Mary Anderson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922); United States Department of Labor Women's Bureau, *Negro Women in Industry in 15 States*, report prepared by Mary Anderson (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1929); Consumer's League of Eastern Pennsylvania, *Colored Women as Industrial Workers in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Consumer's League of Eastern Pennsylvania); Consumer's League of the City of New York et al, A New Day For the Colored Woman Worker (New York: Consumer's League of New York, 1919).

[40] The *Survey* devoted its 2 October 1909 issue to problems facing the black population of New York.

[41] See, for example, Sterling Spero and Abram Harris, *The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931); Charles Franklin, *The Negro Labor Unionist of New York* (New York: AMS Press, 1936); George Haynes, *The Negro at Work in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912); National Urban League, *Negro Membership in American Trade Unions* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1930); Lorenzo Greene and Carter Woodson, *The Negro Wage Earner* (New York: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1930).

[42] Elizabeth Pleck, "A Mother's Wages: Income Earning Among Married Italian and Black Women, 1896-1911," in *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of*

Penn briefly surveyed black women's attempts to organize themselves into unions or union-like organizations.[43] Philip Foner also published several works on various aspects of labor history with sections on black women.[44] This area of study warrants some attention, then, since black women did work in the garment trades and join labor unions, and were not merely relegated to domestic service work, yet so little is known about this facet of their experiences.

With the recent studies which specifically focus on Jewish and Italian immigrant women, and given the fact that nothing has been written on black women in the garment trades, it seems that a reexamination of the dynamics of ethnic relations and lives of these women is necessary. In this work, I will argue that employers and organizers perceived many cultural differences between Jewish, Italian, and black women, but these women actually shared many common experiences in their daily lives and in the workplace as defined by their shared gender and class, and the fact that they were not members of the dominant ethnic group in New York City. Organizers and employers attached their own meanings to what it was to be a Jewish woman, an Italian women, or a black woman, working in the garment trades. Accordingly, organizers and employers devised their own

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American Women, edited by Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth Pleck (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

[43] Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Survival Strategies Among African-American Women Workers: A Continuing Process," in *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History*, edited by Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

[44] Philip Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker, 1619-1973* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974); and sections in *Women in the American Labor Movement*. See also Philip Foner and Ronald Lewis, eds., *The Black Worker From 1900 to 1919*, Vol. 5 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

strategies to bring these women into the labor movement, in the case of organizers, and to prevent them from unionizing, in the case of employers. In reality, Jewish and Italian women only really differed from one another in terms of languages spoken. In the case of black women, the discrimination that they faced due to their skin color, and resulting barriers to their employment in the garment trades and to unionizing, was an additional difference between themselves and Jewish and Italian women. I will be discussing black women separately from Jewish and Italian women, however, due to chronology which places black women in the garment trades much later than Jewish and Italian women. As well, the experiences of Italian women will be highlighted more so than the lives of Jewish women because the lives of Jewish women are well documented.

In the second chapter, the lives of Jewish and Italian women will be explored in relation to education, work, and labor activism. Jewish and Italian women, despite the fact that their cultures were quite different on many levels, were strikingly similar in terms of their day-to-day lives. Women from both groups were expected to sacrifice their educations due to cultural expectations that women did not require an education and for reasons of financial need. Both Jewish and Italian women suffered under the same oppressive working conditions within the shops. As well, Jewish and Italian women shared traditions of labor activism in their homelands, although the degrees to which they transferred these ideas to New York varied, as will be discussed in chapter three. Relationships between Jewish and Italian women in the workplace and in the community will be considered using the interviews conducted with former garment workers in New York City. It will be argued that Jewish and Italian women were able to identify these similarities in their lives and generally enjoyed warm relationships as a result.

Chapter three will be concerned with the attempts of the WTUL to organize Jewish and Italian women prior to and during the shirtwaist makers' strike. Jewish women were able to transfer the training that they received in labor theory in Russia to their new work environments and become labor activists once a Jewish organizer was appointed to listen to their needs. The role of Jewish women in the shirtwaist strike, which has been so extensively discussed in secondary sources, will be reconsidered based on the assertion that Italian women were not solely strikebreakers who did not identify with the aims of the labor movement, but could and did become active in the strike. Italian women did not directly transfer the ideas which they had formed in Italy about labor unions to the New York garment shops until they saw the benefits that could be realized by their families if unionized. Organizers interpreted Italian women's slowness to unionize as due to cultural differences, but language differences formed the major barrier to their organization. Italian women, much like Jewish women, required organizers that addressed their needs and spoke their language.

The fourth chapter will consider the further attempts of the WTUL to unionize Italian women and, more importantly, the efforts of Italians themselves in this regard. Italian women, it seems, continued to fight for gains in labor when the conditions were right as illustrated by strikes such as the 1912 Lawrence mill strike and the massive garment strikes in New York in 1913. Organizers in the WTUL, however, still considered them to be poor activists in the sense that they did not respond in great numbers to the efforts of the WTUL organizers. It will be seen that Italian women had special needs and that the impetus for their activism came from within the family and the Italian community, not from external groups such as the WTUL.

In the final chapter, the work of black women will be explored. Black women were initially overwhelmingly concentrated in the domestic service, although they desired positions in the factories which paid better for less hours of work. Employers refused to hire black women for factory work, blaming it on immigrant workers' refusal to work with black women, though there were actually a variety of other reasons for such discrimination. Some black women found that they could break into the garment trades as strikebreakers, which created a controversy during the shirtwaist makers' strike. While the WTUL begged black women not to undermine the cause of their striking "sisters," the black community argued that black women could not be expected to support the cause of the union that excluded them. The labor shortage during the First World War temporarily forestalled the question of strikebreaking for the most part as black women stepped in to fill unskilled positions in various garment industries. Their hold on these positions was tenuous until the 1930s, in part due to the fact that unions were unconcerned with organizing black women until strikebreaking was a threat to their members and black women formed a sufficient presence in the shops to warrant organization. Special methods were required to organize black women, although language was not a barrier, because they developed a distrust of union officials based on past experiences and the oppression which they faced in the shops was greater than their white coworkers'.

Chapter II: *Cultural Similarities Between Jewish and Italian Women*

Many writers on immigrant women in the garment trades in the early twentieth century have either focused on Jewish women, or on the perceived differences between Italian and Jewish women. That is, writers have presumed that Jewish and Italian women were different simply because they came from different countries and spoke different languages. Elizabeth Ewen, author of *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, has made clear, however, that Italian and Jewish women shared common cultural beliefs, family structures, living conditions, and experiences in the New World. Despite her observations, Ewen neglects to explore the parallels in the lives of these women with respect to work and labor activism in great depth. Yet, in listening to the Jewish and Italian women interviewed in the City University of New York project reflect upon their lives, one is struck by the fact that each woman is telling the same basic story. Their lives were shaped by the fact that they were immigrant women: they were often denied the educations they desired, they labored together in garment shops, and they brought ideas from their homelands about how they could improve their lives through the union. Consequently, beyond language and religious differences, Italian and Jewish women's experiences in the garment trades were so comparable that they were able to develop close bonds with one another, both in the workplace and beyond.

Jewish and Italian women generally never received more than a elementary education in their homelands, and were obliged to quit as soon as they were old enough to work to help out the family financially. In Italy, educational laws were so permissive that women did not go to school for longer than a few years, and for Jewish women discrimination in their homelands hindered them from obtaining more than a basic education. Once in New York City, immigrant children were required to attend school until the age of fourteen, but Jewish and Italian parents either ignored the education laws or removed their children from the schools as soon as they were, or appeared to be, fourteen. Jewish daughters were the most likely to try and pass themselves off as fourteen to obtain factory work, while Italian women would work in home industries with their mothers. Mollie Linker, for example, was able to start working at thirteen, as she was a "big tall girl."[1] Katy Bottman described hiding in the toilet when the inspector came around her cousin's shop.[2] An Italian woman described how her mother would hide her when the truant officer came to their home, and tell him that she had three children when she actually had ten.[3] Many of these Jewish and Italian women wished to continue with their schooling, but felt pressured to contribute to the family earnings. Rose Pasquale, an Italian woman, explained why she left school at fourteen: "My father wasn't working then; he had stomach trouble. It was hard times at home."[4] Bella Hymen also recalled wistfully:

> I had the ambition for study I would have loved to continue. I wanted to study as a nurse, but I needed money to bring my parents over. At that time it didn't pay in the hospitals so I had to quit and go back to the factory.[5]

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[1] Masur and Kramer, *Jewish Grandmothers*, 94.

[2] Interview with Katy Bottman, NS14 I 104.

[3] See Leonard Covello, "The Influence of Southern Italian Family Mores Upon the School Situation in America," *The Italians: Social Backgrounds of an American Group*, edited by Francesco Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1974), 530.

[4] Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 254.

[5] Interview with Bella Hymen, NS14 I 59.

When the financial situation of the family was poor, Italian and Jewish daughters were expected to sacrifice their educations to help out the family.

Both Jewish and Italian parents also believed that girls only needed to reach a certain level of education because a woman's goal was marriage. Jewish boys were expected to continue with school as it determined their future success, while Italian boys continued only if they wished to do so. One Italian mother voiced the general attitude surrounding education for Jewish and Italian women: "when girls at thriteen (*sic*) and fourteen wasted good time in school, it simply made us regret our coming to America."[6] Elisabeth Stern's family, for example, was well off financially, yet her father maintained that she should quit school to marry. Elisabeth explained her desire to continue with her education: "I didn't mean to go to work at fourteen or fifteen, marry at sixteen, be a mother at eighten (*sic*) and an old woman at thirty. I wanted a new thing--happiness."[7] Very few women were able to convince their parents that they were entitled to this happiness derived from going to school. After Caroline Crupi's mother passed away, her father left her living with her grandmother and went to the United States to work. Caroline enjoyed school and her teacher hoped that she would also study to become a teacher. Her father came home for a visit, however, and would not allow her to continue in school, stating that "women gotta stay in a corner in a house."[8] Caroline subsequently relinquished her own happiness by quitting school, learning how to be a dressmaker, and working at home with her grandmother. In order to allow their brothers to get a better education, many Jewish and Italian girls were compelled to sacrifice their own hopes of going to school.

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[6] Covello, "The Influence of Southern Italian Family Mores," 526.

[7] Elisabeth Stern, *I Am a Woman--And a Jew* (New York: J.H. Sears and Co., 1926; New York: Arno Press, 1969).

[8] Interview with Caroline Crupi, NS14 II 22-23.

Large numbers of women did try to achieve higher levels of learning in conjunction with work. In 1908 the public evening school classes in New York hosted a hundred thousand immigrants, and forty percent of the students were women.[9] Anna R. explained her situation:

> There's no use in living ... unless you have an education. Unless you have an education, you have a mind that isn't working. I was a maniac for education. It just meant everything to me ... I just went all out in every possible way to learn--I never went anywhere without a little dictionary. And so ... I went to work by day and went to school at night.[10]

Italian women were less likely to attend night school because they were expected to help around the house after work and it was not seen as proper for them to walk around alone at night. Members of the Italian community strongly enforced the cultural practice of chaperonage which prevented young women from going out at night without a male companion, usually a brother.[11] This practice sometimes influenced the ability of Italian women to learn English, as one contemporary researcher wrote:

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[9] Sydney Stahl Weinberg, "Longing to Learn: The Education of Jewish Immigrant Women in New York City, 1900-1934," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 8 (1989): 112.

[10] *Ibid.*, 110.

[11] This system was used to prevent a woman from having clandestine meetings with her boyfriend, and from being placed in compromising situations with strange men which would damage her reputation. The custom of chaperonage, while seen by many union officials at that time as evidence of the backward nature of Italian culture, actually protected Italian women from dubious dance halls where many other immigrant women spent their leisure time. These dance halls were deemed immoral and dangerous for young women to visit because many women were taken advantage of and some subsequently became prostitutes. Reformers of the time spent a great deal of effort grappling with alternative forms of leisure for young women. Italian women instead socialized within the family unit, or the family would go as a group to Italian community events. See Marie Concistre, "Italian East Harlem," *The Italians: Social Backgrounds of an American Group*, edited by Francesco

> Among several nationalities, notably Italian and Syrian, there is a traditional disapproval in regard to permitting women to go out at night for any reason, unescorted by their men, and so long as this persists it makes daytime lessons for such women the only practicable arrangement.[12]

Nevertheless, some Italian women did at least pursue English classes, if not high school courses, despite the lack of family support. One Italian woman went to night school to learn English, but eventually quit after enduring the taunts of her brother. He echoed the common sentiment regarding the education of women: "'Oh,' he explained, 'she is going to get married. She doesn't need to know English.'"[13] Unfortunately the toll of work and study was too much of a burden for the majority of Jewish and Italian women and their attendance at night school tended to be irregular.

Parents were more likely to be supportive if their daughters studied domestic trades, such as dressmaking or sewing, which were thought to be more useful than formal schooling. Yetta Brier explained her mother's philosophy that everyone should learn a trade because "if you're rich, you wouldn't practice the trade; if you're poor, you would make a living by it."[14] Traditionally, Jewish and Italian girls were taught to sew by their mothers, often starting at a very young age, and improved their craft by apprenticing with seamstresses or taking classes in school. Mollie Wexler, for example, learned sewing skills from her mother:

Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1974), 227.

[12] William Leiserson, *Adjusting Immigrant and Industry* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1924), 314.

[13] Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 255.

[14] Interview with Yetta Brier, NS14 I 6-7.

> My mother took in dressmaking in the house ... I must have been about six years old and she began to show me how to sew ... and by eight years I was working on a machine.

Her mother later apprenticed her to a dressmaker, telling her that she was capable and should learn the trade.[15] Angelina Wanderling likewise was instilled with the belief that sewing was a necessary skill: "When I wouldn't want to sew, my mother would stick me with a needle."[16] Other women obtained specific training in the trades by attending vocational schools, such as the Manhattan Trade School, which better prepared them for the conditions in the factories.[17]

By seeking work in the garment trades, Jewish and Italian women believed that they would be able to use and further develop their sewing skills, which would prepare them for their future marriages. In reality, the specialization in the garment trades only taught women how to sew the same part of a garment over and over again in an assembly line fashion. For those women trained in skilled trades, the transition to working as a machine operator could be extremely frustrating. These women were not able to develop or exhibit their fine sewing skills as Linda Baia, an embroiderer, complained: "In Italy it would take six months to do a pillow and here it must be done in three or four hours. Cheap work!"[18] Mildred Hecht witnessed her pride in craftsmanship disappear:

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[15] Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 26.

[16] Interview with Angelina Wanderling, NS14 II 30-31.

[17] See Mary Schenck Woolman, "Private Trade Schools for Girls," *Charities and the Commons*, 5 October 1907; or Florence Marshall, "The Industrial Training of Women," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 27 (1906).

[18] Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 41.

> When I used to finish making a coat it was good and I would get much pleasure from it. I would look at it and feel good all over like I made a beautiful sculpture ... In America, when I went to work in a factory, I felt like a machine. Here is a bigger speed-up, hurry-up.[19]

Two Italian women summed up the dilemma facing women working in the garment industry:

> Lucy ... said that most Italian girls went into dressmaking and sewing trades because they believed they would be useful to them after marriage. "We have to think of the future and not always of the present." Her sister, however, disputed the fact that the trade would teach her much about making her own clothes. "In a shirtwaist factory," she said, "you may have to do only one part of the waist, sleeves, closing-in, or hemming, and you will have to work fast at that one thing."[20]

Jewish and Italian women were bitterly disappointed when they began working in the garment trades for instead of improving their sewing skills and taking pride in their work, they were expected to sacrifice quality for speed.

The majority of Jewish and Italian women worked in order to support other members of their families rather than to achieve economic independence, whether they contributed their wages to the household or they sent the money to their homelands to bring over other family members. Most women living at home turned over their earnings to their parents who then paid for their clothing, transportation, and necessities, or gave them an allowance. Jewish and Italian women did not donate their earnings to the household because their parents demanded they do so, but more because they felt an obligation to, especially when the family had fallen upon hard times. Many women expressed that to do otherwise was unacceptable. As Molly Linker put it: "It was the respect to bring and give your mother the money (*sic*)."[21] Given the fact that many daughters could earn more than their fathers, these women felt pressured to give as much as they could to the household.

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[19] Weinberg, *World of Our Mothers*, 194-195.

[20] Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 39.

Italian and Jewish working women were usually given an allowance to buy both necessities and luxuries with the amount determined by either the parents or the daughters themselves. Historians have often perceived Jewish women as more independent than Italian women because they would often make their own decisions regarding how much to contribute to the household, depending on their needs and the financial needs of the family. When Bea Gitlin began working, for example, she gave her parents her entire paycheque, but when she was older she gave them only ten dollars a week and kept the remainder for herself.[22] Although Italian women have always been depicted as more obedient and less likely to argue with parents about their allowances, they could be quite assertive, like this woman:

> Filomena Moresco, whose calm investment of $25 in a pretty party dress, a beaver hat and a willowed plume was reported as little less than the act of a brigand. If she had withheld twenty cents out of her pay envelope a week from her mother she probably would have been beaten; as it was she appropriated $25 and her high-handedness was her protection.[23]

Jewish and Italian women were expected to work to help out the family and contribute towards the maintenance of the household, though the amounts that were given varied because most women also wanted to achieve a measure of independence.

Jewish and Italian women also shared common experiences in the workplace. Wages were low for all workers. Jewish women, however, were initially paid slightly more because they had achieved more seniority in the industries and were more likely be able to communicate with their employers who were often Jewish themselves, in comparison to Italian newcomers to the shops. Still, the conditions described in the previous chapter affected all women equally regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. Women workers were commonly subject to sexual abuse, in varying degrees, at the hands of their employers or foremen because they were women. Numerous women remembered cases where they were hugged or kissed by an employer, or forced to sit on his lap. Gussie Agines recalled her mortification when her boss tried to hug her: "I was so ashamed because I didn't know what to say or do. No man had ever kissed me except my father."[24] Women also complained about the crude stories told by men working in the shops. Sometimes the workers were able to put an end to the exploitation, as Rose Schneiderman reported:

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[21] Masur and Kramer, *Jewish Grandmothers*, 96.

[22] Interview with Bea Gitlin, NS14 I 108.

[23] Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, 107.

> She (the chairwoman at the shop) said that Mr. Aptheker had a habit of pinching the girls whenever he passed them and they wanted it stopped. I went to see him in the presence of the chairwoman, told him that this business of pinching the girls in the rear was not nice, that the girls resented it, and would he please stop it ... he said, "Why Miss Schneiderman, these girls are like my children." The chairwoman without a blink answered, "Mr. Aptheker we'd rather be orphans." Of course it was stopped.[25]

Pinching was such a common abuse against women in the workplace that Rose Cohen's first English words were "keep your hands off please."[26] Most of the time, though, women workers did not complain to their employers about the abuse because they were afraid of being fired.

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[24] Weinberg, *World of Our Mothers*, 199.

[25] Schneiderman and Goldthwaite, *All For One*, 87.

[26] Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers*, 198.

Italian and Jewish women found various ways of distracting themselves from the oppressive conditions under which they worked, including daydreaming, singing and socializing. Bella Hymen, a former garment worker, emphasized the optimism that many of the women felt about escaping their dreary work:

> All of us young people were sitting and dreaming in the shops. "Well, it's only for a season or two and I'll be doing this, I'll be doing that, I'll get married. I'll marry a man that will be able to take care of me" and so on. We used to even sing the songs ... Yiddish naturally ... singing the dream songs, the love songs, and this is how we dreamed away our youth and go out gay and happy and what not. And we enjoyed our young life with all its problems.[27]

Angelina Wanderling passed the time by making up stories about the women who would be wearing the dresses she made:

> What kind of a person's going to wear this dress? Is she in good health? Is she a good person? Where is she going to go? Is she going to be careful? Is she going to keep it well? It's not mine--I only made it and got paid for it.[28]

If permitted by employers, Jewish and Italian women could foster closer relations with coworkers while socializing and singing to pass the time in the factories.

With few exceptions, Jewish and Italian women stopped working in the factories when they married since it was culturally unacceptable to continue to work there. Jewish women affirmed that Italian women worked after marriage while they did not, but the reality was that both Italian and Jewish worked in home industries or with their husbands. Mary Abrams stated the reason for this difference between Italian and Jewish women: "the Jews were more proud ... When a man married, he felt he was the provider and the woman's place was in the home."[29] Jean Weiner defined the situation more bluntly:

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[27] Interview with Bella Hymen.

[28] Interview with Angelina Wanderling.

> When they come home, they expected service and if your wife is going to come home an hour later than you or half an hour before you, then you're not going to get the kind of service that they wanted to because they were kings in the house. They'd sit and order you.[30]

Still, in actual fact, the majority of Jewish women did work after marriage, generally with their husbands. Mollie Linker enjoyed being her husband's helpmate and worked at his side for fifty-five years in their candy shop.[31] Some women, like Sylvia Levine, would rather have continued working in the factory: "In those years a Jewish girl gets married she doesn't work any more--it was a terrible thing. Even though I married a man who earned $25 a week."[32] Likewise, Mary Abrams worked in her husband's store, though she would have preferred to become a dressmaker, but maintained that it was not "considered working if you were in business with your husband."[33] Thus, the perception of many Jewish women was that their contributions in the family business or by taking in lodgers was not actual work, even though these labors brought income into the family.

The high number of cases where Jewish men deserted their families also dictated that married women work outside the home. Desertion was so common that the subject was addressed at the 1910 National Conference of Jewish Charities after many applications had been received for relief citing desertion as the reason.[34] A popular feature also appeared for many years in the *Jewish Forward* entitled the "Gallery of Missing Husbands" in which abandoned wives in the United States, Galicia, and Russia appealed for assistance in locating their husbands.[35] While Jewish women asserted that they did not work after marriage, many did not have the luxury.

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[29] Interview with Mary Abrams, NS14 I 1-2.

[30] Interview with Jean Weiner, NS14 I 134-137.

[31] Masur and Kramer, *Jewish Grandmothers*, 100.

[32] Interview with Silvia Levine, NS14 I 21.

[33] Interview with Mary Abrams.

Italian women also quit working in the factories after they married and worked within the home, much like Jewish women, because it was not culturally acceptable to go out to work. The only difference was that while Jewish women were often helpmates to their husbands, large numbers of Italian women did "home work" which was essentially factory work inside the home.[36] Home work was largely unregulated, which made it easier to circumvent education laws so children could stay at home and work. In fact, the children's labor was necessary since the labors of an entire family were required to earn even four dollars a week. As one Jewish woman described Italian families: "the children worked, the grandma worked, and they all worked."[37] Some women preferred to work at home because they could draw upon the help of their children and avoid having to worry as much about child care and household tasks. Other women missed the shops because they provided an opportunity to get out of the house and socialize, and tenements were often too crowded to provide a comfortable work environment. Carolina Crupi was forced to work at home by her husband, despite the fact that she wanted to work outside the home. She described her husband as the most "jealous thing that existed in the world ... wouldn't send me to work ... wanted to keep me cooped in the house." Still, she conformed to his expectations, reflecting that "that's how it is with the Italian people--you gotta do it [listen to your husband]."[38] Italian and Jewish women both stopped factory work after they married and worked in more acceptable forms of labor for married women within the home or with their husbands.

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[34] Louis Levin, "The National Conference of Jewish Charities," *Survey*, 11 June 1910, 469.

[35] Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 179.

[36] It is uncertain exactly how many women did do home work as the census did not include information on this area of employment, but an investigation in the men's clothing trades showed that 98% of home workers were Italian. See Louise Odencrantz, "Why Jennie Hates Flowers," *The Italians: Social Backgrounds of an American Group*, edited by Francesco Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1974).

[37] Interview with Mary Abrams.

Historians of Jewish immigrant women have often considered that Jewish women had strong roots in labor activism in their homelands which they brought to their workplaces in the New York garment trades, whereas Italian women were depicted as lacking these traditions to draw upon. Both Jewish and Italian women, in reality, were active in trade unions in Eastern Europe and Italy. Jewish women came to the United States instilled with values of the importance of unions, sometimes being well-schooled in socialist ideas, partly because they had suffered under legal discrimination and persecution of varying degrees in their homelands. The Bund was a socialist organization in Russia that drew in many Jewish women and gave them a consciousness of the conditions under which they lived. These ideas strongly influenced many individuals to immigrate to the United States, as Bella Hymen explained:

The people that came from all over here were already all class-minded. The boys

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[38] Interview with Caroline Crupi.

> and girls that came were very young--15, 16, 14--came at a very young age. The Russians due to the depression and pogroms, the Galicia oh, they poor people--didn't have anything. We had to seek out places of bettering our lives.[39]

As Fanny Heltzer clarified, most of the people who came from Russia were inclined to socialism because "of the conditions that are prevailing there. They were actually forced to think otherwise than their country presented to them."[40]

Eastern European women had not only been exposed to ideas relating to activism, but had put them into practice in their homelands. Rose Rubin, from Poland, worked as a quill winder before she came to the United States, At the age of eleven she went on strike and was arrested on the picket line.[41] Therefore, large numbers of young Jewish women had a clear picture of what was unjust in their lives in Eastern Europe and they came to the United States carrying these thoughts.

The interviews overwhelmingly illustrate that these women, primarily Russian Jews, were able to transfer these ideas into practical use once installed in the New York garment shops. Rose Cohen, for example, was educated in a socialist school in Russia and joined the Socialist Party when she moved to New York. Rose's parents had hoped that she would continue with her night school education, but she saw it as her duty as a socialist to organize the workers in her garment shop. She would meet secretly with her coworkers in the ladies' room of the waist factory to teach them about the union.[42]

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[39] Interview with Bella Hymen.

[40] Interview with Fanny Heltzer, NS14 I 110.

[41] Interview with Rose Rubin, NS14 I 55.

[42] Interview with Rose Cohen, NS14 I 9.

Yetta Altman had been influenced by her father in matters surrounding unionism as he was active in the unions and political movements in Poland. She described how her father and his colleagues could not meet in a house or they would risk arrest. Instead, they would take out a marriage license in order to legitimately assemble, and hold their political meeting. Yetta immigrated to the United States at the age of twelve in order to save enough money to bring over the rest of her family. This responsibility weighed heavily upon her, and she stated that she knew she had to go to work and did not come for pleasure. Yetta herself became an activist while employed in the Albert Waist Company for a man whom she described as "the rottenest boss that I ever worked for." After refusing to work on a particular garment, Yetta influenced other less sophisticated women not to work on it either and they "made a stoppage." When asked why she would belong to the union even though she was such a good worker, Yetta echoed the sentiments of a number of women: "on account of the good workers, the bad workers make a living." Clearly she felt a sense of class consciousness and believed in the necessity of protecting her coworkers through personal sacrifice.[43]

Sonia Farber, who came from Kiev around 1906, had also been active in revolutionary movements and participated in meetings and strikes. She described a general strike in Kiev in 1905 in which people were beaten and arrested by police and they were forced to give in. Yet, she was still optimistic, and remained committed to unionism:

> ...we had quite a nice revolution that day--it didn't last long because the police weren't with us. I couldn't understand when I came to the U.S. why we couldn't make a revolution in the U.S.

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[43] Interview with Yetta Altman, NS14 I 3.

Consequently, when she came to New York she sought to work in a union shop: "You see, I knew what a movement means and I know what a union is so I went to look for the union." She ended up working in a non-union shop, but when they "threw down" sixty pressers, she went to the ILGWU and asked them to organize her shop:

> He says "where are you working?" I says "Mark Solomon." He says "Mark Solomon! It's five hundred people and we haven't got five hundred members. How can you take down a shop like that?" So he laughed at me and I started banging on the table and crying "I want a union." So they had to take me out from that job and put me in a union shop. A small shop.

At the time of the shirtwaist makers' strike, Sonia was married, but she "was involved in every strike. Even if I wasn't working, even if I worked for myself, I used to come and picket with them and be on the picket line."[44] As the series of strikes in the garment trades would illustrate further, Jewish women had a strong sense of the necessity of unions, which was derived in part from their experiences in their homelands.

Southern Italian women also possessed experience in agricultural unions in Italy, which illustrates that they, too, were not ignorant of matters concerning labor activism. Women constituted a large percentage of the agricultural workforce in Italy, generally working side by side with men for considerably lower wages. Historian Emiliana Noether found that these women actively participated in agricultural strikes and agitation in 1893-94 and in 1898:

> Accounts of these demonstrations that soon became riots and led to the imposition of martial law in many parts of Italy reveal that women participated actively at the side of men, sometimes even at the head of columns of peasants who set out, often peacefully, to ask for lower taxes and cheaper bread. From 1894 to 1898 the average number of agricultural strikers every year numbered roughly 5500 and 2200

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[44] Interview with Sonia Farber, NS14 I 81.

women.[45]

Italian women, while working in an environment where they were at the sides of their husbands, could also join with their husbands to fight for more money for their families.

In the flood of immigration between 1900 and 1910, many men left for the United States leaving their wives and children to work in the fields in Italy.[46] Booker T. Washington described the impact of these migrations on the women who were left behind when he visited Italy:

> ... my attention was attracted by the large number of women I saw at work in the fields. It was not merely the number of women but the heavy wrought-iron hoes, of a crude and primitive manufacture, with which these women worked that aroused my interest. These hoes were much like the heavy tools I had seen the slaves use on the plantations before the Civil War. With these heavy instruments some of the women seemed to be hacking the soil, apparently preparing it for cultivation; others were merely leaning wearily upon their tools, as if they were over-tired with the exertion. This seemed quite possible to me, because the Italian women are slighter and not as robust as the women I had seen at work in the fields in Austria.[47]

Despite the fact that many men were leaving the workforce in Italy and being replaced by women workers, Italian women continued to fight against the unjust pay and working conditions, which suggests that they were not totally controlled by men in their actions. Claire LaVigna, a historian, found Italian working women on the whole to be more active in labor organizations than Canadian women were, partly due to the large numbers of Italian women in the workforce. In Italy, the high percentage of women working in agriculture or in textile factories were more prone to bond and join together in unions. The Italian National Federation of Textile Trades, faced with the reality of 300,000 women in the industry, made their unionization a priority and by 1908 the number of unionized women nearly equalled the number of men.[48] Some women were even involved in leadership roles. The success of agricultural unions was assured due to the labor shortages which drove the wages up and created a desperation on the part of landowners to restrict emigration.[49]

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[45] Emiliana Noether, "The Silent Half: *Le Contadine Del Sud* Before the First World War," *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1978), 7.

[46] The immigration patterns were so disproportionate that there was one Italian woman for every nine Italian men in New York City until 1915. Valentine Rossilli Winsey, "The Italian Immigrant Women Who Arrvied in the United States Before World War I," *Studies in Italian American Social History*, edited by Francesco Cordasco (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), 199.

[47] Booker T. Washington, "Naples and the Land of the Emigrant," *Outlook*, 10 June 1911, 295.

These two studies illustrate that Italian women had strong models for unionization. They were not, as many authors have argued, apathetic and lacking in a revolutionary tradition. The women who were active in the unions in Italy, however, did not go on to work in the factories in the United States, as was often the case with Jewish women. Rather, the daughters of these Italian women found positions in the New York garment trades and did not seek to better their working conditions until they felt that unions would meet their needs. The dynamics behind this transition from Italy to New York will be discussed further in chapter three, but it is important to note that the fact that Italian women were initially reluctant to unionize sometimes created conflicts with Jewish coworkers who were strong unionists. More often the pattern of relationships between Jewish and Italian women at work was very positive.

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[48] Claire LaVigna, "Women in the Canadian and Italian Trade Union Movements at the Turn of the Century: A Comparison," *The Italian Immigrant Woman in North America* (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1978), 36-37.

[49] Antonio Mangano, "The Effect of Emigration on Italy," *Charities and the Commons*, 4 April 1908, 13-14.

It is important to explore the personal relationships between Jewish and Italian women in the workplace and in the larger community to see if these women recognized the parallels in their lives. Most of the women who were interviewed were fairly vague, yet positive, in their answers when they were asked how Jewish and Italian workers got along. The usual responses were "very beautifully,""very nice," or "very good." From all accounts, it does seem that women were more comfortable working with women from the same ethnic group simply because communication was not a problem. Rose Rubin, for example, enjoyed working in her mainly Jewish shop because "we used to be jolly--we talked to each other you know--get friendly with each other and do our work in the mean time."[50] Likewise, Angelina Saltalmacchia had fond memories of her second place of employment: "I liked it because it was a lot of Italian lady and everybody used to joke, you know, sing."[51]

Since most of the interviews were conducted with Jewish women, there are a number of descriptions of incidents which showed that there was friction with Italian coworkers, but only with respect to unionism. Ida Seltzer, for example, was bitter about the apathy of the Italian women in her shop:

> Italian girls most cheap, they work for cheap and all that. They didn't like me because I was no good for them ... because I want a union shop. I want that they should get more money. I didn't like how they worked there, they were slaves.[52]

She even described how in one strike she hit an Italian strikebreaker with her umbrella after being similarly assaulted. Yetta Altman stated that in her shop the workers were mainly Jewish and, having come from Russia, were schooled in the revolutionary tradition. The Italian women were not which created some problems: "There was a little bit of friction ... had a lot of trouble with them ... I don't want to say it, but they were hard to organize."[53] The role of Italians as "scabs" or as "goons" hired to intimidate strikers could exacerbate tensions between Italian and Jewish women. Jean Weiner was distressed about the "goons" who harassed her on the picket lines, but tried not to let the fact that they were Italian prejudice her:

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[50] Interview with Rose Rubin.

[51] Interview with Angelina Saltalmacchia, NS14 II 40.

[52] Interview with Ida Seltzer, NS14 I 132.

> People were people, but I was primarily a Jewish person ... But we just identify them as goons. It didn't make any difference if they were Irish, they would still be goons, you know what I mean, but it happened that the Italians were in this kind of a business more than the Irish were.[54]

The fact that Italian women were reluctant to join unions, then, was a source of contention for Jewish women.

Italian women were less likely to perceive conflicts with their coworkers, or at least were more cautious in articulating them. As Carolina Crupi stated: "I'm friend with anybody. For me there's no discrimination over race--Jewish, Polish, any kind."[55] Angelina Wanderling attributed any friction between workers in the shop as being due to the size of bundles for piecework because the larger bundles took longer to finish so workers fought over who would get the small bundles.[56] If Jewish women attributed tensions with Italian coworkers to the fact that Italian women were less active in unions, it seems logical that Italian women would also sense the strain and respond in kind. Either Italian women were guarded in answering this question in the interviews or friction between coworkers was uncommon enough not to warrant mention by Italian women.

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[53] Interview with Yetta Altman.

[54] Interview with Jean Weiner.

[55] Interview with Caroline Crupi.

There were many cases where Italian and Jewish women bonded closely. If workers knew English, they could actually communicate with their coworkers, which helped to foster cooperation among different ethnic groups in the shops. Bella Hymen, for example, stated that she got along with her coworkers, but found it a struggle to interact with them:

> All our lives in the factories it was Jews and Italians, Polish people and that's why none of the immigrants [could talk to one another] unless we went to school and had schooling, even so none of us speak a perfect English ...[57]

Communication with one's coworkers seemed to be extremely important to many of the women who were interviewed, and several women described how they overcame language barriers by using signals to communicate. As Grace Gelo explained:

> Now these Jewish people were also very fresh immigrants and they didn't know how to speak English. So we were are the group of Italian fresh--we didn't know English ... Confusion! We had to work by sign and it was very hard ... you couldn't mingle socially because ... the communication wasn't there. We tried to with signs. We tried to get along, but there was no such thing--communication.[58]

Ida Seltzer maintained that when the Italian women working in her shop "worked with

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[56] Interview with Angelina Wanderling.

[57] Interview with Bella Hymen.

[58] Interview with Grace Gelo, NS14 II 25-26.

Jewish girls, they learned to talk Jewish."[59] This form of adaptation is interesting, though it is unclear to what extent the Italian women did "learn" the language spoken by their coworkers: whether they understood some words or were actually able to speak Yiddish to some degree. Jewish and Italian women were clearly able to cope with language barriers and certainly made every effort to overcome them.

The majority of Italian and Jewish women had fond memories of the close relationships they shared with their coworkers. Belle Chinoy enjoyed being with her Jewish and Italian coworkers, and stated that they got along so well that she "went there like to my own home."[60] She, and other women, reflected on how, when someone left the shop to marry, all the workers made contributions towards a farewell gift.[61] Ida Seltzer, who voiced complaints about the apathy of Italian women toward unionism, was touched over the efforts of her coworkers in this regard:

> When I had to get married they made me a surprise party. When I came in the machines, everything was decorated ... the shop gave me a present--the girls, not the boss, the girls--was a big crystal candlestick. Italian girls, they were nice--nicer than the Jewish girls some of them ... I had a lot of friends to my wedding, even two girls were Italian girls.[62]

Clearly, for Ida at least, tensions that existed between Jewish and Italian workers with respect to the unions did not affect her personal relationships with Italian women on an individual level. Mollie Linker also reflected on her experiences with her Italian coworkers:

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[59] Interview with Ida Seltzer.

[60] Interview with Belle Chinoy, NS14 I 105.

[61] Belle Chinoy mentioned that the workers always chipped in to buy a gift when someone married. In her case, she did not tell anyone that she was getting married. When she phoned her employer to tell him, he chastised her for not letting him know sooner. Her employer then came over to her home and brought her a beautiful roll of Irish linen as his gift.

[62] Interview with Ida Seltzer.

> There was mostly Italian women and girls [working there]. As you know, they're lovers of music. About once every week, we used to go to the old Auditorium; we were up in seventh heaven. And the garlic smell was awful but they liked it. I saw operas. We went straight from work. Everyone watched over me; they all liked me. I was one of the youngest ones.[63]

An Italian woman interviewed by Columba Furia worked in a shop composed entirely of Jewish workers and passed herself off as Jewish for a year because she feared she would be discriminated against by coworkers. She even attended meetings of the Jewish local and made many friends who "often wondered why she never learned Yiddish, or why such a bright 'Jewish' girl had never continued to go to school." Once she realized that her coworkers believed in cooperation with other ethnic groups against the common enemy, the employer, she revealed her identity to them and continued to enjoy warm and close relations.[64]

Outside of the workplace, it was rare for a woman to associate with women of ethnic backgrounds different from her own unless they were neighbours. Jewish women tended to live in Jewish communities, while Italian women lived in Italian ones. Angelina Saltalmacchia, for example, did not see any of her coworkers outside of the factory because she said that none of them lived near her.[65] Mary Abrams lived in a Jewish community and thus only mixed with non-Jewish women in the workplace "but not socially."[66] Jean Weiner also, while friendly with Italian women in the shop, "never made any Italian friends socially."[67] Therefore, physical geography strongly influenced relationships between women outside of the workplace.

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[63] Masur and Kramer, *Jewish Grandmothers*, 96.

[64] Furia, "Immigrant Women in Industry," 403.

[65] Interview with Angelina Saltalmaccia.

[66] Interview with Mary Abrams.

Women who lived in neighbourhoods with people from many different ethnic backgrounds did become close to their neighbours and help them out in difficult times. Jean Weiner recalled that an Irish woman, Mrs. Henry, with nine or ten children lived in her Jewish neighbourhood. The Jewish women in the community would take care of Mrs. Henry's children, do all the cooking, and act as midwives each time she gave birth.[68] Michael Gold reflected that his mother talked about hating Christians, but actually had warm relationships with her Italian and Irish neighbours. When an Italian woman, Betsy, was forced to provide for her three children after her husband was jailed on murder charges, Mrs. Gold helped Betsy obtain home work to sustain her family. They would have long conversations, drawing words from Italian, Yiddish, Hungarian, and English, but somehow were able to understand one another and become close friends.[69] Rose Rubin described the apartment building in which she lived as a "League of Nations," in terms of the ethnic backgrounds of its inhabitants. She made an effort to get along with her neighbours and to encourage her children to do the same. As she explained it: "It's all experience that you went through when you got families and you're poor and you gotta manage and I did the best

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[67] Interview with Jean Weiner.

[68] *Ibid.*

[69] Gold, *Jews Without Money*, 167.

I could."[70] Angelina Wanderling, in reflecting on growing up surrounded by Jewish and Irish families, said: "... they would exchange the way they knew and then the heart would speak--they would understand one another. They all had large families and they all were home wives."[71] Clearly Jewish and Italian women who lived near one another in the tenements recognized that they led parallel lives in many respects and this knowledge drew them together in close friendships.

The closeness fostered by living in the tenements sometimes encouraged relationships to develop among members of different cultural groups, although such alliances were certainly not sanctioned by the Jewish and Italian communities. One's country of origin was not important in the Jewish community, just shared religious affiliations. A number of women described mixing socially with Jews from different countries, including Bea Gitlin who stated: "We didn't question where you come from, you know, a Jew is a Jew and that's it."[72] In the Italian community, it was unacceptable to date non-Italians, even if Catholic. Caroline Crupi was very upset with her son after he got engaged to an Irish woman. She was unsure if they even married since she refused to attend the wedding, which suggests that she had little or no further contact with her son.[73] Still, despite these cultural prohibitions, a number of intermarriages were recorded, especially after 1910, though never numbering more than a hundred in a year according to the Marriage License Bureau.[74] One writer attributed these intermarriages as being due to the weakening of religious values among Jewish women, who were less likely to pursue religious education than Jewish men were.[75] A contemporary, Celia Silbert, wrote that:

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[70] Interview with Rose Rubin.

[71] Interview with Angelina Wanderling.

[72] Interview with Bea Gitlin.

[73] Interview with Caroline Crupi.

> While the Italian youth is the mental equal of the Jewess, this is hardly so where the Jewish young man and the Italian girl are concerned. This difference makes the Italian youth desirable to the Jewess, and the Italian maiden undesirable to the Jew ... girls who contract these marriages with Italians are usually of a tender age ... It is usually the poorer working girl that married the Italian youth ....[76]

It is highly unlikely that members of the Italian community would accept this theory, which depicts them as possessing little intelligence and suggests that Italian men exploited the young idealism of Jewish working women. The fact that intermarriages occurred between Jews and Italians is best explained by the fact that there were sufficient similarities in the cultures and experiences of Jewish and Italian immigrants to allow for the development of close relationships between members of each group.[77]

Jewish and Italian women found themselves in similar situations, then, as defined by their cultures and their gender. Many women learned to sew at a young age in preparation for their futures as wives and mothers. They entered the garment trades because such labor was socially acceptable, often at the expense of formal education which was denied to them because of financial reasons and parental disapproval. Moreover, these women were immigrants who were adjusting to a bewildering new environment, had little or no command of the English language, lived in the same crowded and dirty tenements, and were subject to the same indignities and exploitation in the workplace: such shared experiences led them to develop close friendships with one another, both in the workplace and in the community. The experiences which Jewish and Italian women shared as working class women, then, transcended language barriers and religious differences on a personal level.

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[74] Glanz, *The Jewish Woman in America*, 81.

[75] *Ibid.*

[76] *Ibid.*

[77] According to sociologist Daniel Monti, there was a rise in the number of intermarriages after World War I because decreased immigration, coupled with the economic and social mobility of Italians, made Italian enclaves within the cities less important or cohesive. See Daniel Monti, "Some Sort of Americans: The Working and Reworking of Italian-American Ethnicity in the United States," *Italian Americans in a Multicultural Society: Proceedings of the Symposium of the American Italian Historical Association* (Stony Brook: *Forum Italicum*, 1994), 22-23.

Chapter III: ***Jewish and Italian Women in the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike***

The Shirtwaist Makers' strike in 1909 offers an excellent opportunity to examine relationships between Italian and Jewish women in the garment trades. One contemporary wrote on the strike that "It is a unique spectacle to see Jews, Italians, and Americans working shoulder to shoulder for a common cause."[1] This view, however, is not reflected by the primary and secondary sources on the strike which emphasize the roles of Jewish women and upper and middle class native-born white women, while dismissing Italian women as strikebreakers apathetic to unionization. By examining the efforts of the WTUL to bring Italian and Jewish women into the labor movement and the barriers to their union activity, both before and during the strike, it is clear that organizers found it less exacting and more rewarding to organize Jewish women. Jewish women were generally less restricted by their parents and by religious leaders in union activities than Italian women were. Furthermore, the task of finding Yiddish-speaking organizers was less complicated than that of recruiting Italian-speaking organizers. Due to language differences and the fact that organizers perceived cultural barriers to the organization of Italian women, organizers put little effort into their unionization. Yet Italian women proved that they could be quite active strikers if financial considerations did not force them to go back to work. The larger Jewish community, as well, was not much more supportive than the Italian community if the reports of the Jewish and Italian press are any indication.

Jewish waistmakers, by the time of the strike, were fairly well-schooled in labor unionism and were enthusiastic about joining the union under their own terms. Jewish women workers in other industries had set a precedent for joining the unions and actively supporting strikes, thus it was not a new concept for Jewish waistmakers. Several obstacles stood in the way of unionization: the difficulties posed by differences in language between union leaders and workers, and the resulting slowness on the part of union officials to grasp what it was the Jewish women sought from the union.

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[1] Constance Leupp, "The Shirtwaist Makers' Strike," *Survey*, 18 December 1909, 385.

The ILGWU executive members floundered with respect to forming strategies to recruit members, as discussed in the first chapter. The executive was composed of Jewish men, many of them socialists, who attempted rather ineffectually to organize skilled male workers and virtually ignored women workers. An editorial in January 1911 in the ILGWU's *The Ladies' Garment Worker* explained how overwhelmed the ILGWU leaders were at the idea of organizing immigrant workers in the years before the Shirtwaist Makers' strike:

> The backward state of civilization and industrial development of the countries from which the bulk of the people engaged in our trades emigrated from, has made the problem of organizing them into a union so difficult as to discourage the more faint hearted among us and lead them to the conviction that it is impossible to organize the great mass of floating immigrants who enter our trade each year by the tens of thousands.[2]

Jewish women pressed for action on the part of the ILGWU executive, who were able to speak Yiddish. Jewish women still found it troublesome to deal with the executive because these men did not understand how women's needs were different from male workers. The WTUL thus served as an intermediary between Jewish women workers and the Jewish executive of local 25.

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[2] "The International Union in 1910," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 2 (January 1911), 1.

The Waistmakers' local of the ILGWU was formed in 1906, but had only a handful of members due to a lack of funds and the need for an organizer. It was proposed that Clara Silver, the highly successful president of the Hand Buttonhole Makers' Union, take over the task of organizing the waistmakers. The Jewish waistmakers refused Silver, however, and were insistent that a Jewish organizer be found, with whom they could communicate.[3] This request was finally met, an appalling two years later, when Rose Schneiderman was appointed in 1908 by the WTUL to organize the waist and dress shops. Schneiderman, a working class Jewish woman herself, had been involved in a Capmakers' strike in 1905, thus many workers could identify with her. A scholarship from an unknown benefactor in 1908 allowed her to attend school during the day and work as an organizer in the evenings.[4]

Rose Schneiderman commenced her duties at a time when there was a depression and workers cared more about simply having work than they did about organizing and improving their wages and conditions, thus she found her work to be frustrating.[5] She visited East Side unions with women as members to explain the purposes of the League and the principles of trade unionism.[6] Her confidence was somewhat restored after a successful strike of the White Goods' (women's underwear) workers in which unorganized workers walked out and she was able to convince them to join the ILGWU local 62 after they won their demands. Much like the white goods' workers, Jewish women waistmakers did not join the union until the strike was called, despite Schneiderman's effectiveness in conveying the trade union message. Part of the reason was that Schneiderman's strategy involved using strikes to unify the Jewish workers and bring them into the union. As she explained it, "exploitation was ruthless and discontent ran high ... strikes were spontaneous and numerous," and many were "without prior organization and without leadership."[7] Once workers made the decision to walk out, then, Schneiderman and other League members stepped in to help the strikers conduct meetings and organize picket lines, and they collected money for relief, provided speakers for meetings, and secured legal assistance.[8] Rose Schneiderman was someone who understood the language and specific needs of Jewish women workers, and therefore assisted them in gaining acceptance with union officials. The task of finding an Italian organizer, though, was much more complicated.

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[3] McCreesh, *Women in the Campaign*, 107.

[4] Schneiderman and Goldthwaite, *All For One*, 83.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*, 84.

In reading the newspaper coverage of the strike, one could easily come to the conclusion that the strike brought the question of organizing Italian women out in the open, however the WTUL had broached the subject several years previously. The issue was first discussed in the Secretary's Report of December 1907 which affirmed that plans were in the works to organize Italian women by forming a committee and speaking to "important Italians," but that "special methods" were necessary.[9] The "Italian Committee" was subsequently formed and consisted of five non-Italians and three Italian men including Dr. Antonio Stella, a physician who occasionally wrote for *Charities and the Commons*, Tito Pacelli of the subway workers' union, and F.L. Frugoni, whose occupation was unknown. Whether these "important Italians" that were to be spoken to were so categorized due to their political, economic, or social power or influence is uncertain. It is evident, however, that the WTUL intended first to approach men of influence to reach the Italian women workers. The final impetus for this strategy, though, did not come from the League or Italians themselves, but corresponded with pressure from Jewish human hair workers to organize the Italian women in their trade.[10] These women were extremely interested in ensuring cooperation from their Italian coworkers, partly out of concern for Italian workers and partly because Italian women undermined the aims of the union. As one Jewish hair worker reported, "The Italians do the work for less money, not knowing that they get less money, for they take work home at night when the other girls have refused."[11] The WTUL initially assigned Leonora O'Reilly to this duty, but as the Jewish workers became more insistent, they asked that Tito Pacelli, try to "get hold of the men and through the Italian men ... reach the Italian women."[12] Pacelli appeared to be quite busy already, but promised to do what he could when he had the time. The dynamics of the relationships between Italian men and women indicated that Italian women were more likely to unionize if approached by Italians, rather than WTUL organizers.

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[7] *Ibid.*, 89.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Secretary's Report, 26 December 1907, Papers of the Women's Trade Union League and Its Principal Leaders: The Women's Trade Union League of New York Papers (reel 1, frames 282-283). This collection can be found on microfilm at the Tamiment Library at New York University, and will hereafter be cited as the WTUL Papers with the specific name of the collection listed after.

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[10] Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 23 June 1908, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 340); Secretary's Report, 26 December 1907, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frames 340 and 374).

[11] Dye, *As Equals and As Sisters*, 110 as quoted from National Woman's Trade Union League, *Proceedings of the Third Biennial Convention, 1911*, 19.

[12] See Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 23 June 1908, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 340); Secretary's Report, 27 October 1908, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 374).

The relationships between Italian men and women were often characterized in such terms:

> ... his women belong to him as much as the feather bed and the copper saucepans he brought with him from the homeland. As a thinking human being, acting independently, the southern Italian immigrant woman does not exist. She obeys absolutely the will of her nearest male relative ...[13]

Many Italian women remained behind in Italy and combined the roles of mother and father in caring for the home and children and wage-earning, while their husbands went to the United States to seek their fortunes and earn sufficient funds to send for the family. Hence, many Italian women achieved a sense of independence and the knowledge that they could singlehandedly provide for themselves and their children. Within the tightly knit Italian communities in New York, Italian women maintained a traditional role in the home, reinforced by the community and by neighbours who would gossip if a woman were to behave in a manner deemed inappropriate.[14] While Italian men possessed the power in the public sphere, Italian women controlled the family and the activities within the home. Leonard Covello described this relationship in his family after his father fell ill:

> My brother who became the head of the household, had to take orders from her. But that was done only in our home. On the street, he tried to impress everybody that he was the boss of the family. As I remember now, it was laughable to see him give my mother commands in the presence of other people and then, five minutes later, to

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[13] Adriana Spadoni, "The Italian Working Women of New York," *A Documentary History of Italian Americans*, edited by Wayne Moquin and Charles Van Doren (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 128.

[14] Furia, "Immigrant Women and Industry," 15.

> listen politely to what my mother had to say at home.[15]

Thus, when Italian women went out to work, they had to maintain the illusion that their husbands, fathers, or brothers were in control. Consequently, Italian women did not demand to be unionized as Jewish women did, unless the men in their lives approved with the cause, as will be seen in later strikes.

The other aspect to this issue was that Italian women were motivated to work for the benefit of the family, not for individual gain or to achieve independence, as discussed in the previous chapter. Organizers had to convince Italian women that unions were for the benefit of the family, not just for women's benefits as a individuals, and the best way to do so was to gain support of Italian men and make unionism a concern of all members of the family. It could be argued that Italian women were most active in unions when fighting alongside their husbands for the financial benefit of the entire family, as was the case in Italy, but not in New York. Italian women were not passive and apathetic with respect to unionism, but organizers did need to realize that their needs were slightly different from Jewish women in this respect.

Closely following the first discussions on the hair workers, the WTUL took the first step towards ensuring a longer term commitment from Italian women in other trades. By June 1908, Miss Bennett, a volunteer with the WTUL, had formed a social club where eighteen Italian women had met for music and refreshments, and had agreed to meet every two weeks.[16] While reaching a handful of Italian women was a starting point for the League, the WTUL was frustrated by the language barriers that prevented them from drawing in more interested workers.

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[15] *Ibid.*, 20-21.

[16] Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 23 June 1908, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 340). Many individuals were not identified by their first names and

The issue of language was addressed through the recruitment of Italian, or at least Italian speaking, women who presumably were better able to volunteer their time than Italian men were. Although the same problem had been addressed with Jewish women, WTUL executive members were presented with a far more formidable task in acquiring an Italian organizer. The League did not have the luxury of choosing the ideal organizer to reach Italian women, but rather was forced to accept any willing volunteers. In one case, an Italian-speaking woman proffered her services, but she was not actually Italian herself, which undoubtedly would have given her slightly less credibility among Italian women workers. The "Italian Committee," though, expressed optimism over enlisting the aid of an Italian-speaking woman:

> The secretary reported that she had seen Miss Adams, who could speak Italian and had been recommended as a good worker by the presidnet (*sic*) of the league, in regard to working among the Italians for the league. It was voted that if the league had funds and it was thought advisable Miss Adams would be engaged.[17]

Adams was never mentioned again in the meetings, although there is no reason to assume that she did not render her services to the League. In any case, it was clear that finding an Italian organizer with the experience, skills, and credibility of Rose Schneiderman was an insurmountable task.

The League was also fortunate enough to acquire an Italian volunteer, Miss Briganti,

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therefore will be referred to by title and last name only, as in the primary sources.

[17] Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 27 October 1908, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 365).

who offered to visit Italian workers. She was deemed to be:

> ... very anxious to help her Italian sisters, she speaks English and Italian and seems quite ready to get up at a meeting and tell them what to do. She impressed me with the fact of how terribly guarded the Italian girls were and the only hope of our doing effective work is through an Italian woman.[18]

Briganti addressed a significant issue with respect to unionizing Italian women. While the League had correctly assumed that Italian women could be influenced by the men in their families to join the union, an Italian woman organizer could not only be a role model but was more understanding of the issues facing her sisters. A League organizer, Miss Watson, also met with a settlement house club of Italian women finishers after their wages were cut to bring them "the spirit of Unionism." Unfortunately, the WTUL decided not to form a local union of finishers due to financial contraints and these women likely lost the motivation to seek better wages.[19] The WTUL was beginning to recognize that support from Italians was necessary to organize Italian women, but it was slow to grasp the best means by which to do so.

The question of language was also addressed through the production and circulation of pamphlets in Yiddish and Italian which, it was hoped, would especially reach out to Italian women. Whenever possible the WTUL distributed standard WTUL pamphlets written in Italian, English and Yiddish to workers in the garment trades. These pamphlets, entitled "Why Should Every Girl Join a Union?" read as follows:

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[18] Monthly Report to the Executive Board, 24 November 1908, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frames 388-89).

[19] Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 25 May 1909, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 457).

> Because the man she is going to marry is having his wages lowered by the girl who will work for less than he will.
> Because if you don't marry your own wages will be lowered by the girl who will work for less wages than you will.
> Because everyone knows in a trade without Unions the hours are long and the wages low.
> Because everyone knows in trades with Unions the hours are shorter and the wages higher.
> Because everyone knows the trade union is *The Only Way* to raise wages and to shorten hours.[20]

Reporter Sarah Comstock, who wrote for *Collier's Magazine,* explained how the WTUL always stressed marriage since this was the chief goal of most women workers. Some women, particularly Italian women, were thought to lack a commitment to labor unionism because they planned to work only for a short time before marriage, and subsequently cared little about the working conditions and wages in the long term. By emphasizing that her unionization would protect her future husband from earning less, and thus being unable to provide for her after marriage, the WTUL was able to appeal to workers. The fundamental problem with this approach was the high rate of illiteracy among workers, as discussed in the previous chapter, which the WTUL does not appear to have accounted for.

The degree to which each immigrant group was able to adapt to the New World, to "Americanize," played the strongest role in dictating the degree to which a woman transfered her knowledge of unionism to the garment shops. Illiteracy hindered the efforts of the WTUL to publicize their aims using the written word, whether it was written in English, Italian, or Yiddish. The ability of immigrant women to communicate in English, while certainly highly desirable, was not as necessary when there were Jewish and Italian speaking organizers. Women who could not read their native tongue, in contrast, would potentially remain on the fringe of union activities because they could not understand the flyers and pamphlets handed to them by union organizers and may have been too shy to ask what they meant, instead tossing them away. These women relied on coworkers and "word of mouth" for information, which posed few difficulties for Jewish women who dominated the industry, but was a distinct problem for Italian women. Bella Hymen described how Jewish workers in her shop assisted one another in this regard: "[those] who understand a little better had to talk to the one who didn't and this is how we built the big powerful union."[21] As well, the education gained by Jewish women sometimes included specific instruction in labor theory, from the Rand School for example, which strongly influenced their activities in the workplace and unions. They may have actively sought out this information, irrespective of the fact that they did not know English, because they had a consciousness about unions. By virtue of the fact that Jewish women immigrated before Italian women, Jewish women were far more likely to know English than Italian newcomers. Jewish women also faced slightly less opposition from parents in terms of attending night school and studying English than Italian women did.[22] Knowledge of English and level of literacy influenced the degree to which workers became active in unions.

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[20] Sarah Comstock, "The Kindergarten of the Factory Girl: Initiating the Working Woman into the Principles and Benefits of Organization," *Collier's*, 23 April 1910, 19.

The WTUL also made a tremendous effort to appeal to potential unionists by holding many events at the League headquarters. On Monday evenings from six to nine o'clock working women could visit the League and learn about trade unionism. On another evening, the League held English classes for workers in recognition of the fact that many could not understand the arguments of trade unionism being presented to them. The League also organized a debating club, a singing class and a gymnasium class.[23] WTUL leaders identified the importance of such events. According to Pauline Newman, a Jewish organizer:

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[21] Interview with Bella Hymen.

[22] Jewish women also were more likely to live independently of their parents than Italian women because they often came from Eastern Europe and worked to bring over other family members. Italian women never immigrated alone and rarely lived alone due to the custom of chaperonage.

> The Women's Trade Union League deserves credit for being the first organization to realize the necessity of combining social features with the serious side of work. No wonder, then, that so many of us feel more at home within the League than in any other union.[24]

While these women are dancing and singing, Newman stated, "they learn the lesson of 'sticking together.'"

Several issues arose with respect to the approach of the WTUL. First, many of the activities which the League organized were inappropriate for immigrant working women. Rose Schneiderman, for example, recalled her amazement and doubt when attending her first meeting of the WTUL in which little business was transacted and members danced the Virginia Reel.[25] As Nancy Schrom Dye wrote, "the League's gentility undermined workers' self-confidence and made them feel awkward ... the organization's aristocratic character was foreign and often suspect."[26] Only with time did Jewish women, at least, become less sceptical about these aspects of the League's work as they began to recognize, as Schneiderman did, that the women in the League were of a different social class but were sympathetic to the plight of laborers.[27] Another problem with these endeavors was that Italian women were not able to leave their homes at night to attend a meeting unescorted. This custom was a hindrance for union organizers who were required to hold meetings after work, but could not draw in Italian women in the evenings unless chaperoned. As Sarah Comstock wrote: "Italian prejudice prevented their attending meetings which must perforce be at night."[28] Hence, while Jewish women were slowly drawn into these classes, the process was slower with Italian women, although Comstock reported that once they acquired a few words in English "their prejudice against going out at night breaks down."[29]

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[23] Comstock, "The Kindergarten of the Factory Girl," 20.

[24] "What the New York Women's Trade Union League is Doing to Organize Women," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 2 (August 1911), 12.

[25] Schneiderman and Goldthwaite, *All For One*, 78.

[26] Nancy Schrom Dye, "Creating a Feminist Alliance: Sisterhood and Class Conflict in the New York Women's Trade Union League, 1903-1914," *Feminist Studies* 2 (1974), 28.

Despite these efforts, it could be argued that the WTUL did not possess any consistent policy toward immigrants in the industry, and the lack of faith of some WTUL members was an impediment to the unionization of Jewish and Italian women. The National Women's Trade Union League president Margaret Dreier Robins referred to the League as a "kindergarten" training school whereby workers would be initiated into trade unionism, and "gathered under its wing, mothering them through their difficulties and their strikes, calming hysteria or rousing from apathy ..."[30] Since it was a "kindergarten," Robins reasoned, "music and merrymaking are so essential a feature of our league work ..."[31] By referring to the WTUL as a kindergarten, Robins illustrates how little she thought of immigrant women, giving them no credit for being able to fight for their own interests by organizing themselves, or calling a strike as many workers had done without being organized. More importantly, she ignores the fact that many of these women had been schooled in trade unionism, whether formally in socialist school or informally in the home, and some had participated in political activities in their homelands.

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[27] Schneiderman and Goldthwaite, *All For One*, 83.

[28] Comstock, "The Kindergarten of the Factory Girl," 20.

[29] *Ibid.*, 20.

[30] *Ibid.*, 19.

Margaret Dreier Robins also espoused an anti-immigrant standpoint, arguing that New York immigrant women were

> ... inferior in physical strength and organization to the Western girls. The women in New York have suffered for too many generations, and their vitality has been sapped. I don't think the Western girls will come to that. There is more good native American blood out there, and they are fighting for their own protection. Although this is only the first generation of girls at factory work, they are far better organized than the girls here, and the further west you go, the better is the organization.[32]

This statement was uttered after many Jewish workers in the Triangle, Rosen Brothers', and Leiserson's shirtwaist shops had been on strike for six weeks of their own choosing and without direction from the unions. Ironically, as well, the women who had "good native American blood," were to prove themselves of no assistance whatsoever in the general strike. The Secretary of the New York League, Helen Marot, likewise showed her bitter feelings towards Italian women once the strike had ended. While there is no evidence that other New York WTUL members, including Robins' sister Mary Dreier, shared these sentiments, it reflects poorly on the WTUL leadership as a whole.

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[31] Mary McDowell, "The National Women's Trade Union League," *Survey,* 16 October 1909, 106.

[32] *New York Times*, 3 November 1909, 9.

Many factors hindered the cooperation between Jewish and Italian women in unionizing. According to one organizer cited in a study by Alice Kessler-Harris, Jewish women felt that they were "superior unionists" and "treated non-Jews in the garment shops suspiciously complaining, for example, that Polish women would listen to their speeches quietly and then report them to the boss."[33] Perhaps Italian women felt similarly distrustful of Jewish women due to the shared ethnicity with the Jewish employers who oppressed them.[34] While this is certainly a possibility, it is uncertain whether this conflict existed as Jewish employers hired thugs to brutally assault Jewish and Italian strikers without discrimination.

Employers often did, however, attempt to exploit what they deemed to be "ethnic" differences and pit Jewish and Italian women against one another. Italian women worked for lower wages, which occasionally created bitterness on the part of Jewish women. Ironically, as was the case with the hair workers, many Italian women garment workers did not even realize that they were earning less, or being asked to work longer hours or take work home because they could not communicate with Jewish coworkers. Employers also prevented cooperation between the two groups by making it difficult for workers to communicate with one another. As Rose Schneiderman reported:

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[33] Alice Kessler-Harris, "Organizing the Unorganizable," 12.

[34] For example, Rose Pesotta, in organizing for the ILGWU in California, found organizing Mexicans difficult because they transferred their hatred of Jewish bosses to Jewish coworkers. See Robert Asher and Charles Stephenson, eds., *Labor Divided: Race and Ethnicity in United States Labor Struggles, 1835-1960* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 12.

> In many of the places the girls are known by numbers. Two girls will work side by side for weeks without knowing each other's names. Italians will be placed by the sides of Jews, and race antagonism worked on to keep the girls at daggers' points, so that there will be created a distinct feeling against any sort of organization and fellow-feeling.[35]

Mr. Leiserson, who owned one of the first shirtwaist shops to go on strike in 1909, hired a brutal and cruel Italian foreman who made the lives of the workers miserable in order to foster resentment between Italian and Jewish workers.[36] During the shirtwaist strike, a Jewish striker, Jacob Malev, was sentenced to five days in the workhouse after assaulting this foreman.[37] Employers used any means possible to create tensions between the two groups and prevent them from identifying with a common cause. In the dress industry, Mrs. Evalenko attempted to pit her striking Italian and Jewish employees against one another by trying to lure back the Italian women with promises that she would take them back but would not re-employ the Jewish women "as she suspected them of leading the Italian girls out."[38] The Italian women refused this offer which illustrates that while employers assumed that there were tensions between Jewish and Italian workers, the two groups did not perceive any such antagonisms.

For the most part, these tactics of dividing Italian and Jewish workers appeared to be quite effective as a deterrent to walking out until the general shirtwaist strike in 1909 due to the fact that Jewish women could not be sure that Italian women would join the strike effort. An article by Constance Leupp in the *Survey* summarized the idea:

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[35] *New York Times*, 6 December 1909, 1.

[36] *New York Call*, 3 September 1909, 1.

[37] *New York Call*, 21 September 1909, 1.

[38] *New York Call*, 9 September 1909, 2.

> Probably the only consideration that had kept them in check before [the strike] was the fear on the part of the Jewish girls--the larger part of the trade--that the Italians would "scab." Employers had made clever use of race and religious antagonism to keep the girls from uniting.[39]

While many contemporary writers used the term "race antagonism," the most common method used to divide workers was actually language, especially given the fact that Jewish and Italian women shared many cultural traits.

Once the strike was officially declared, a WTUL representative attended a meeting of the ILGWU to further discuss the organization of the Italian workers in the trade. ILGWU executive members already had selected a man to organize the Italian workers in the trade, but requested that the WTUL form a separate women's local to "get hold of the Italian women." Arthur Caroti, the ILGWU recruit, was a former International Workers of the World (IWW) official and socialist who was managing a cooperative store owned by the silk workers of Hoboken, New Jersey.[40] He maintained a low profile during the strike, only being mentioned once by the *New York Call*, and interacted with the Italian workers on a more personal level. Beyond this act, then, the ILGWU appeared to have little interest in organizing the Italian workers, reporting that shops "where American and Italian girls were employed, remained at work."[41] The WTUL and the Italian Socialists were the only groups involved in trying to reach Italian women.

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[39] Leupp, "The Shirtwaist Makers' Strike," 384.

[40] Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions A Case Study," 490.

[41] "The Strike of the Ladies' Waist Makers of New York and its Results," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 1 (May 1910), 2.

With the WTUL concentrating on coordinating almost all aspects of the larger strike effort, there were few organizers specifically designated to convince Italian women to join the union. Miss Reisen, one of the women most active in organizing Italian women during the strike, was not even an Italian herself. Her position was to keep the Italian women from returning to work once they had made the decision to strike:

> Almost daily someone would jump up and propose to return to work. Miss Reisen, who did not know the Italian language, would guess what was proposed, jump to the platform and plead vociferously until she would get the Italian women to remain with her in the hall. She had to put up at first with a lot of abuse, but gradually she won the hearts of the Italian strikers. And towards the end of the strike she could report to the strike committee that she "could almost understand what the Italians were talking about."[42]

Miss Briganti, who volunteered with the WTUL before the strike began, continued to devote time to giving speeches and working in the Italian headquarters. The work of the male Italian organizers, mainly from the Italian Socialist Party, often attracted more Italian strikers.

Salvatore Ninfo, of the Italian Socialist Party, was one of the major activists responsible for promoting the strike to Italian women workers. He addressed many of the large meetings and on November 25, for example, he spoke at 48 meetings, 32 of which were Italian.[43] It seems in some cases that the Italian committee was quite successful. In the New York Waist Company twenty Italians were working as strikebreakers, but the committee was able to convince fifteen of them to strike.[44] A more gratifying victory was achieved over the National Waist Company which had boasted that their Italian employees would never go on strike, but "were given a surprise when they all walked out."[45] This event more or less coincided with the fact that Italians were provided with a central meeting place which relieved some of the chaos which characterized the Italian strike effort.

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[42] Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 156-57.

[43] *New York Call*, 26 November 1909, 2.

By December 1909 a headquarters for the Italian strikers had been opened at the Manhattan Lyceum where meetings were held daily with a number of notable Italians, including Miss Briganti and members of the Italian Socialist Party, giving speeches.[46] Antonio Cravello and Publio Mazzella, both of the Socialist Party, also took on the task of visiting Italians and persuading them not to act as strikebreakers.[47] At the mass meeting at the Hippodrome on December 5, Publio Mazzella was the only Italian speaker. He noted that it was the first time that an Italian had been asked to address a meeting of that nature, and reminded the audience that Italians needed assistance in organizing:

> Some months ago while in Italy, Samuel Gompers promised the leaders of the labor movement in Italy that the American Federation of Labor would give its moral and material assistance in organizing the Italian workers in this country. Now, I would like to ask whether that promise was given sincerely, and if so when the work of organization will begin. The Italian workers are awaiting the fulfillment of Gompers' promise.
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> Let us organize an Italian United Trades like the United Hebrew Trades, not like the Civil Federation, so that we may be respected as intelligent workers.[48]

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[44] *New York Call*, 8 December 1909, 3.

[45] *New York Call*, 26 November 1909, 2.

[46] *New York Call*, 2 December 1909, 3.

[47] *New York Call*, 2 December 1909, 3.

[48] *New York Call*, 6 December 1909, 2.

Mazzella's request was not granted in the years following the strike, but highlighted a significant deficiency in the work of the unions. Italians were always organized by small branches of larger trade union organizations like the AFL, IWW, and WTUL, but never possessed an organization devoted solely to their own labor interests and concerns. Partly in response to the concerns which Mazzella raised, a group of Italian professors, settlement workers, and other professionals held a conference at the WTUL headquarters to discuss launching a movement to organize Italian workers into unions.[49]

Notwithstanding the lack of organizers and organizations to unionize Italian women, numerous other obstacles existed, the chief problem being, of course, language. As Rose Schneiderman of the WTUL later reflected: "[there was] a serious problem in the strike-breakers' inability to understand our message of trade unionism. I mean literally to understand because language was a great problem to organizers ..."[50] The WTUL struggled to recruit Italian speakers for meetings, often without success, and typical was scenes such as the following:

> "Say you send a speaker quick--right now. The girls are there and they don't wanta wait."
> "Say, they're all leavin' We can't keep 'em. Hurry up a speaker in Italian ..."
> "Can't get an Italian to-day. Hardest thing to find," said Miss Marot [of the WTUL].[51]

The *New York Call* often entreated Italian speakers to volunteer their services for meetings.[52]

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[49] *New York Call*, 19 January 1910, 1.

[50] Schneiderman and Goldthwaite, *All For One*, 91.

[51] Sarah Comstock, "The Uprising of the Girls," *Collier's*, 25 December 1909, 15.

[52] *New York Call*, 1 December 1909, 2.

Aside from the difficulties in organizing and finding speakers and procuring funds to pay strike benefits, attempts to unionize Italian women met with opposition from the Church and often family. One sixteen-year-old Italian striker told women at the Colony Club that her employer "got the priest to come around and tell the Italian girls that if we went out on strike with the Jewish girls we would all go to hell--excuse the language."[53] Max Goldberg, the proprieter of a Brooklyn shop, was another employer who called in a priest to speak to the Italian women in his shop. The priest blamed the Jewish women for causing all the problems in the shop and exhorted the Italian women to ignore the strike.[54] This tactic of using religious authority figures to keep the Italians at work was a common one. Other Italian women were forbidden by their parents or brothers to strike. Italian women who did act as strikebreakers were often escorted to work by their fathers or brothers to prevent them from being convinced by organizers and strikers to join the effort. With escorts, these women were also protected from injury due to harmful or violent incidents between strikers and strikebreakers on the picket lines. Devout Catholic daughters would be quite reluctant to openly disobey the requests of their priests and demands of their families. Thus, the Italian women who did go on strike risked slightly greater opposition than Jewish women seemed to.

More energy was devoted to organizing Jewish women during the strike because there were less obstacles to their unionization. The WTUL found it easier to recruit Jewish speakers, especially since one of the New York WTUL executive members, Rose Schneiderman, was Jewish. One of the most active attorneys defending the strikers in night court was also a Jewish woman, Fannie Horowitz. More importantly, Jewish leaders could be found among the strikers, women who identified with the cause, worked in the industry, and spoke the language. Clara Lemlich was a focal point in the press coverage that generally devoted its space to the work of the upper and middle class women. Clara Lemlich was a Ukrainian immigrant who spent her free time studying English and Russian, reading history and literature, and taking night classes--including courses in labor theory at the Rand School. All this was accomplished while she worked long hours in the garment industry to save for medical school. Although Lemlich was quite well-paid, she encouraged and led her lesser paid coworkers to strike. She was arrested seventeen times and suffered numerous injuries, including six broken ribs.[55] Referred to by the *New York World* as the "Joan of Arc" of the strike, Lemlich was a natural leader because she was proficient in English, eloquent, passionate, and educated in labor theory.

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[53] *New York World*, 16 December 1909, 20. See also *New York Tribune*, 16 December 1909, 8; and a speech delivered by Rose Schneiderman at a WTUL banquet, 20 May 1910, Margaret Dreier Robins Papers in WTUL Papers (reel 8, frame 366).

[54] *New York Call*, 8 December 1909, 3.

Jewish strikers have generally been credited by the media, organizers and employers with sustaining the strike effort. One employer, Joe Roth, maintained that the Jewish workers were the only ones causing trouble in his shop and praised the Italians and "Americans" and gave them chewing gum and chocolate.[56] Another blamed the anarchists and socialists for riling up the Jewish women and asserted that the "American, Irish, Italian, and other nationalities are not concerned ..."[57] Thus, it was certainly the perception of employers that Jewish women were active strikers, while Italian women were not.

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[55] For more information on Clara Lemlich, see Paula Scheier, "Clara Lemlich Shavelson."

[56] *New York Call*, 7 December 1909, 2.

In sheer numbers, Jewish strikers formed a massive presence on the picket lines, and the newspapers, especially the *New York Call*, are filled with the names and stories of Jewish strikers and the hardships they faced. While Clara Lemlich was certainly the most famous of the strikers, many others made tremendous sacrifices, particularly in terms of personal safety due to the continual attacks on their persons. Some strikers were actually sent to the workhouse on Blackwell's Island by magistrates who argued that if they were fined, one of the rich women would only pay it.[58] When sixteen-year-old Rosa Perr was sentenced to thirty days in prison, Mary Dreier and Rose Schneiderman pleaded with the magistrate to reconsider:

> We asked if he realized what it would mean to a girl her age to be locked up with prostitutes, thieves, and narcotics addicts. "Oh," he said, "it will be good for her. It will be a vacation."[59]

Bertha Elkins was imprisoned in the workhouse for five days, necessitating the postponement of her wedding which made for good publicity for the strike.

Some of the Jewish strikers were extremely outspoken about the wrongs done upon them and attempted to fight back, others became quite discouraged. Yetta Ruth, for example, was charged by police for leading out other workers at Beckman and Hayes shirtwaist shop. She publicly denounced the officers who detained her for their comments and, her "face flaming red," spoke to reporters at the *Call*:

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[57] *New York World*, 24 December 1909, 7.

[58] Clark and Wyatt, "Working-Girls Budgets: The Shirtwaist Makers and Their Strike," 81.

[59] Schneiderman and Goldthwaite, *All For One*, 93-94.

> "The policemen asked me with how many men I was living. One officer told me that I was a dirty Socialist and anarchism (sic). One man said 'here is a nice fellow, Yetta, hook onto him.' One policeman showed me a torn pair of pants and asked me to mend them." The little girl stopped abruptly and her voice failed her. She was urged again to continue and after some hesitation said: "One man went to some place and winking to me, said: 'Come along Yetta.'"[60]

Several Jewish strikers were so depressed over the strike that they even attempted suicide, such as Gussie Perk who stuck her head in a gas oven.[61] When she was rescued by her cousin's husband, Perk launched into a "bitter arraignment of industrial conditions," wailing "Let me die ... what's the use of living and being a slave" before lapsing into unconsciousness.[62] Another striker, Sadie Cohen, was found dead in a gas-filled room after going through "a period of dejection" regarding the strike.[63] These cases brought some publicity to the cause of the strikers.

Contradictory statements appear in the press regarding the number of Italian women actually sympathetic to the strike. On November 24, Elizabeth Dutcher of the WTUL told the *New York Call* that "As the strikebreakers are all Italians, and the strikers Jewesses, there is a danger of racial feeling which we feel the masters are constantly inciting."[64] The next day, however, Salvatore Ninfo announced that:

There is a thousand of my people out and they are standing solidly with their fellow

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[60] *New York Call*, 4 December 1909, 2.

[61] *New York Tribune*, 2 December 1909, 5.

[62] *New York Times*, 2 December 1909, 3.

[63] *New York Times*, 7 December 1909, 2.

[64] *New York Call*, 24 November 1909, 2.

> workers determined to win before they return to work. There is no race prejudice among us as some of the papers try to make out. We are all united for a common purpose. The Italian strikers are among the most active in doing picket duty and assisting in the work of carrying out the strike. There is no chance of them breaking away from the union and returning to work.[65]

By the next day, the Call reported that four hundred Italians had settled with their shops and returned to work.[66] On December 1, however, the *New York Times* reported that 1,000 more workers had gone on strike, "principally Italian girls." Most estimates placed the total number of Italian strikers at around three thousand.[67] The *New York Tribune*, which barely discussed the strike at all, reported that the Italian strikers had asserted that they would "keep up the strike until it was won."[68]

References to Italian strikers are few in newspapers and magazine articles, but they were often just as active as Jewish strikers. Sarah Comstock, who paid a visit to the strike headquarters at Clinton Hall, reported that "two excited young Italians" appealed for assistance after the shop where they had been picketing sent out "toughs" to frighten them away and they were consequently too intimidated to approach the shop.[69] Many other Italian women were more aggressive in their demands, shattering the illusions of contemporaries that they were passive and cowed by their male relatives. A highly publicized incident involved a "lively fight" between a strikebreaker, Celia Copeloff, and two Italian strikers,

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[65] *New York Call*, 25 November 1909, 2.

[66] *New York Call*, 26 November 1909, 2.

[67] William Mailly, "The Working Girls' Strike," *Independent*, 23 December 1909, 1419.

[68] *New York Tribune*, 13 December 1909, 3.

[69] Comstock, "The Uprising of the Girls," 15.

Raffaela Evangelista and Giuseppi Zazo.[70] Copeloff asserted that the strikers had held her and "the Evangelist woman had stabbed her in the forehead with a pair of scissors."[71] As the police took away the two accused, other strikers attacked police, stabbing Sergeant Deye with a hatpin. It seems that the dispute had a positive conclusion because Copeloff later joined the strikers and was arrested for picketing.[72] Some Italian women exhausted more non-violent options in order to publicize their cause. One Italian striker was a speaker at the meeting held at the Colony Club, and appealed to her audience by describing her conditions of work and how she earned four cents a dozen for finishing waists.[73] Two sisters, Angelica and Grace Serra appealed to Mayor Gaynor to act as an arbitrator, between strikers and employers, after they had been on strike for nine weeks and were arrested for picketing. Grace was fined ten dollars, but Angelica, who was only fifteen, was sent to the work house on Blackwell's Island for five days. The Mayor conceded that the punishment seemed somewhat extreme and promised to look into the charge that magistrates were too severe in their treatment of strikers.[74]

Despite the activism of Italian women strikers, they still received less attention from the media than did Jewish women. The press generally only reported on the women who were assaulted, arrested, or otherwise mistreated, so perhaps Italian women were active on the picket lines but less likely to invite arrest by speaking to strikebreakers. Italian strikers may have felt uncomfortable with confronting Italian strikebreakers, and were unable to speak to Jewish strikebreakers due to the language barrier. It is also probable that Italian strikers were protected on the picket lines by male relatives or friends much like Italian strikebreakers were. This theory is given credence by the fact that the press mentions more Italian men than women being arrested by police. Alex Guertis, for example, was arrested while handing out circulars of the Italian bureau to Italian strikebreakers.[75] Two other Italian men, Tony Clacchia and Mario Arcario, were fined for disorderly conduct although they were not actually strikers but sympathized with the pickets.[76] The contributions of Italian strikers, then, are largely unknown beyond the fact that large numbers did go on strike.

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[70] Apparently the two strikers were mother and daughter. See the *New York Call,* 25 December 1909, 2.

[71] *New York Times*, 24 December 1909, 3.

[72] *New York Call*, 3 February 1910, 2.

[73] *New York Times*, 16 December 1909, 3.

[74] *New York Times*, 18 January 1910, 1.

Some mention needs to be made of those Italians who did cross the picket lines. The major motivating factor was economic necessity, although it can also be argued that there were not enough Italian organizers to promote the strike and convince Italians to join. Arthur Caroti, the ILGWU organizer, attempted to persuade Italian women to strike by educating them and their families on unionism. He quickly realized that this method was ineffective and began to pay the women strike relief to keep them from strikebreaking. As soon as Caroti convinced one women to strike, another would quickly take her place. The fathers, however, not the women themselves were the most formidable obstacles. The women sometimes earned more than did their fathers or at least their wages were necessary to sustain the household, thus fathers demanded that they receive full wages as strike benefits.[77] Caroti was able to pay only five dollars a week to married women and three dollars and fifty cents to single women living at home. As Caroti ran short of funds, he endured a great deal of harassment as "the male relatives of the 'scabs' descended upon the Women's Trade Union League headquarters and demanded the wages of their women . demanding that he make payment or meet the consequences." He was also threatened anonymously by graffiti on the WTUL headquarters saying "Pay, Caroti, or you die!" Caroti had no fears about these threats, stating:

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[75] *New York Call*, 4 December 1909, 2.

[76] *New York Call*, 30 November 1909, 1.

> Afraid? I know them. When they came to my office I pointed to the wall: "Look what some fool writes." Bah. Like a child threatening the passer-by with his toy pistol, the grumbling relatives went home.[78]

The fact that these women would go on strike if paid benefits strongly suggests that financial constraints, not opposition to or ignorance of trade unionism, induced Italian women to "scab." Despite this example, there were many more Italian strikers who did remain firmly committed to the strike.

It is difficult to ascertain the state of relations between Jewish strikers and Italian strikebreakers on a personal level. The newspapers did not explicitly identify the ethnicity of strikebreakers involved in disputes with strikers, though the names were always given. The *Call* named far more Jewish strikebreakers than Italian and only rarely mentioned Italian "scabs." A few incidences of violence between Italian strikebreakers and Jewish strikers were described. Anna Raffino, for example, charged that striker Max Joseph attempted to "slug" her.[79] On January 3, 1910 Maria Deltara was assaulted by two Jewish strikers, Esther Monto and Annie Cohen, who were sent to the work house as a result. On the same day, Mary Les, an Italian strikebreaker, hit Bella Putterman on the head with her pocketbook causing a large wound. Putterman and fellow pickets Fannie Cooper and Beckie Schwartz yelled to a policeman for assistance, but were dragged away and fined in court for calling Les a "scab."[80] On January 18, Mary Bruno was also called a "scab" by two Jewish strikers who were then arrested.[81]

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[77] In Louise Odencrantz' study, *Italian Women in Industry*, she found that while many fathers reported their weekly wages to be quite high, they had so many slack periods during which there was no work that their average wages were considerably lower. For example, one man said that he earned $24 a week. When Odencrantz investigated further, however, she found that he had only actually earned that amount for four weeks of the entire year, while for 44 weeks, he had earned nothing. Another man claimed his weekly wage as $16.50, but he earned that amount for only 13 weeks, while for much of the time his wages hovered around $4.00. Pages 172-173.

[78] Spadoni, "The Italian Working Women," 14.

Often employers paid strikebreakers to testify against strikers, as was likely the case where Sadie Schneewiss was accused of assaulting three Italian strikebreakers, all of whom were larger than her. The Italian women testified that Sadie told them she would break their faces if they went back to work.[82] Part of the reason why these incidents rarely occurred was that Italian women always had a male escort accompanying them, such as more than one Italian woman discussed in the *Call*.[83] Moreover, the language barrier generally prevented

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[79] *New York Call*, 11 December 1909, 2.

[80] *New York Call*, 4 January 1910, 2.

[81] *New York Evening Post*, 19 January 1910, 3.

[82] *New York Evening Post*, 21 December 1909, 2.

[83] *New York Call*, 25 December 1909, 2.

Jewish strikers from speaking to Italian strikebreakers about the need to strike, thus avoiding potential clashes between the two groups. The animosity between Jewish strikers and Italian strikebreakers, then, while almost certainly present, did not manifest itself in cases of assault, either verbal or physical.

Disputes between Jewish strikers and strikebreakers appeared to be far more common owing to the fact that they could communicate with one another. The nature of most contacts on the picket lines were of strikers approaching strikebreakers to ask them to join the union and immediately being arrested by police for "disorderly conduct." Sometimes violence did erupt, such as when Ida Bolinsky allegedly punched a strikebreaker and knocked out two of her false teeth, which had to be removed by a stomach pump in order to be used for evidence.[84] Margaret Moskowitz, a strikebreaker, was kicked in the breast and stomach by strikers, including Sadie Friedman, and was said to be in a precarious condition.[85] One striker, Ada Hoffman, had ended her relationship with her "sweetheart" Herman Goldstein because he refused to strike. When she saw him emerge from the factory on December 1, she slapped him a half dozen times across the face and called him a "scab."[86] Jewish strikers, then, were not reluctant to confront Jewish coworkers who crossed the picket lines. The details of these relations were more prevalent in the newspapers than were instances of conflict between Jewish strikers and Italian strikebreakers, or Italian strikers and strikebreakers. Judging from the many newspaper articles naming Jewish strikebreakers, one could easily come to the conclusion that there were indeed substantial numbers of Jewish "scabs." One must consider, however, that there were many more Jewish women in the industry so there was a correspondingly high number of Jewish strikebreakers, but still a smaller percentage than Italian strikebreakers.

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[84] *New York World*, 11 January 1910, 3.

[85] *New York Times*, 25 December 1909, 2.

[86] *New York Times*, 2 December 1909, 3.

Support from members of the Italian community was scattered, if the strike coverage in Italian newspapers is representative of the views of the Italian population. Italian strikers passed a resolution condemning all Italian newspapers, except the *Glornale Italiano*, for favoring the strikebreakers in their coverage of the strike and for printing advertisements for scabs.[87] *L'Araldo Italiano* and *Il Bolletino Della Sera* did provide some additional coverage of the strike, but the articles were brief and non-controversial.[88] *Il Bolletino Della Sera* allowed Gioacchino Fiorello, who would later become the Italian editor of the *Ladies' Garment Worker*, to print official strike bulletins.[89] *L'Araldo Italiano* published daily accounts of the events of the strike, the arrests, the trials of strikers, and which shops had settled, but ignored the contributions of Italian strikers and organizers.[90] The largest newspaper, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano,* basically had no coverage of the strike, printing only two articles in December.[91]

Despite the activism of the Jewish strikers, they were not really assisted in their efforts by the larger Jewish community. Jewish labor interests, such as the United Hebrew Trades Association (UHT), did aid the strikers. On January 12, for example, the UHT raised $60,000 for the cause by having each of its members pledge a half day's wages. The UHT was also heavily involved in the negotiations with the employers and the Manufacturer's Association for a settlement of the strike.

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[87] *New York Call*, 6 December 1909, 2.

[88] Furia, "Immigrant Women in Industry," 128.

[89] Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions," 493.

[90] *Ibid.*, 492.

[91] *Ibid.*

A 1908 article in *Charities and the Commons* explains in part why only Jewish laborers donated money to the cause while other citizens were apathetic. The article highlighted the plight of the United Hebrew Charities which, at that time, closed down for a while during the winter and was unable to assist many Jewish people in need due to unemployment. In a campaign to raise a hundred thousand dollars, letters were sent out to thousands of prominent Jewish citizens, but only 257 responded with donations totalling 78,000 dollars.[92] The author of the article found it striking that out of approximately one million Jews in New York, so few supported the United Hebrew Charities financially. He hypothesized that Jews who had immigrated to the United States many years ago contributed to distinctly Jewish organizations. Their children, however, often lacked the knowledge of Jewish traditions and did not follow the religion, thus they identified with and contributed to non-denominational associations. New immigrants, such as the strikers themselves, had little to give to others as they could barely support themselves. The trend in giving to others among members of the Jewish community, then, was seldom based on shared religious and cultural values, as those with wealth were losing touch with their backgrounds. This theory certainly explains, in part, the apathy of members of the Jewish community, but more importantly, that the wealthy identified more with Jewish employers than they did with Jewish strikers.

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[92] "The Jew and the Jewish Poor," *Charities and the Commons*, 14 November 1908, 270.

A few Jewish religious leaders recognized the need for the Jewish community to support their co-religionists in the strike. Rabbi Samuel Schulman criticized the members of his Temple Beth-El for their indifference:

> The attitude of the household of Israel in this strike ... is a disgrace to the synagogue. It is the prominent women of Christian society that are bringing sympathy, counsel and help to the striking girls. I regret it is my duty to proclaim aloud of the synagogue and its shame in failure to bring peace between the Jewish employer and the Jewish employe *(sic)*.[93]

Rabbi Schulman emphasizes a significant point about the Jewish role in the strike. Since many of the employers were Jewish also, the Jewish community had trouble choosing sides in the struggle and opted to remain aloof from the issue. Dr. Stephen Wise from the Free Synagogue, risking the loss of members of the congregation, publicly championed the cause of the shirtwaist strikers and condemned the employers for refusing to arbitrate the strike.[94] The Council [of] Jewish Women at the Free Synagogue also discussed the strike with WTUL representatives.[95] In a meeting similar to but less publicized than the gathering at the Colony Club, Mary Dreier, Leonora O'Reilly, and Rose Schneiderman presented the case of the strikers to the Council of Jewish Women and received their sympathies.[96]

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[93] *New York Evening Journal*, 10 January 1910, 5.

[94] *New York Times*, 13 December 1909, 16. The next day the *Times* printed a response from the Manufacturer's Association.

[95] *New York World*, 22 December 1909, 4.

[96] *New York Call*, 22 December 1909, 2.

It is interesting to note that among the upper and middle class women who volunteered their time and money during the strike, only a few were Jewish, thus provoking criticism from the WTUL. According to a report by Eva McDonald Valesh of the AFL and WTUL, the Jewish community was not supportive enough:

> ... although 75 percent of the striking girls were of the Jewish race ... a very small amount of the relief fund was contributed by wealthy Jewish citizens of New York. They seemed to stand aloof and have little sympathy while women like Anne Morgan and Elizabeth Marbury and Mrs. O.H.P. Belmont were bending every effort to collect money from their friends after they had given large sums personally to assist the cause.[97]

This report, then, underscores the perceptions that the WTUL had about the Jewish community's apathy during the strike, which is especially significant if the contributions of the synagogues were to be contrasted to the sympathy shown by church members who had no religious ties to the strikers. The Manhattan Congregationalist Church, for example, asked Rose Schneiderman to speak about the strike and took up a collection for the strikers during the holiday season.

The Jewish press, like the Italian press, was split on the issue of the strike. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company had established a branch plant in Yonkers in order to break the strike against the main factory in Manhattan and employed twelve strikebreakers from Manhattan and twelve from Yonkers. After a meeting held by the Yonkers Central Labor body on December 3, however, it was explained to these workers that they were employed as strikebreakers and they consequently walked out. The *Yiddish Morgen Journal* ran advertisements for the Triangle appealing for workers for this branch plant by stressing that the rents were cheaper in Yonkers.[98]

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[97] Special Correspondence by Eva McDonald Valesh, Papers of the WTUL: Rose Schneiderman Papers (reel 2, frames 22-25).

The *Jewish Daily Forward*, though, was quite supportive of the strike effort. The *Forward* organized a benefit for the strikers at Thalia Theatre on November 8. The performance was a four act play entitled "East Side Ghetto," and Abe Cahan and B. Feigenbaum, editors of the *Forward*, spoke between the acts.[99] The benefit was such a success that hundreds of people were lined up when the box office opened and hundreds more had to be turned away.[100] The writers at the *Forward* also printed articles supporting the strikers and condemning the shirtwaist manufacturers. The *Forward* had at least one dispute with the Triangle Company in the form of a $150,000 lawsuit against the newspaper for damages resulting specifically from six articles promoting the benefit in which the company was "bitterly denounced." The *New York Call* printed an example of how the Triangle Company mistranslated one of the articles:

> The translation is so crude that in many instances it is hard to get at the meaning of the allegations, and the well-written original accounts of the strike are rendered gruesome and unconnected ... "The murders that happen from the strike of the Triangle Waist Company is hard to be described."
> The original has it that "the cruelties inflicted by the Triangle Waist Company on the strikers taxes the imagination."[101]

It stands to reason that because the owners of the Triangle were Jewish, they were particularly offended by attacks by a Jewish newspaper. No further information was given regarding the outcome of this lawsuit, however. Thus, the Jewish and Italian press was, in general, disapproving of the strike with the exception of socialist newspapers.

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[98] *New York Call*, 4 December 1909, 2. The *New York Times* reported on 10 December 1909 on page 13 that this bid to acquire strikebreakers had been unsuccessful and that the Triangle had been forced to close down the Yonkers branch factory.

[99] *New York Call*, 8 November 1909, 1.

[100] *New York Call*, 10 November 1909, 1.

[101] *New York Call*, 19 November 1909, 3.

In examining the contributions of Jewish and Italian women during the strike, many writers have argued that Jewish women were much more class conscious than Italian women. It appears in the case of the shirtwaist makers' strike that Jewish women were better known in the strike because they garnered more attention from the English language press. First, the WTUL began to organize the Jewish shirtwaist makers' in 1908 using Rose Schneiderman, a working-class Jewish woman who could communicate with the workers. Although the WTUL attempted to organize Italian women beginning in 1907, the executive did not really procure an Italian organizer until around the time the strike commenced. This difference, in part, explains why Italian women were slower to respond to the strike call. As well, Jewish women had a number of leaders within the factories who were able to speak English, understand the aims of the strike and the union, and thus transmit this information to their Jewish sisters and lead them in the strike. Italian women, being more recent immigrants, were less likely to speak English and thus had less exposure to the union's ideas. Italian women's inability to understand the WTUL organizers also inhibited the emergence of an Italian woman leader. Despite these factors, several thousand Italian women did eventually strike under the direction of Arthur Caroti and Salvatore Ninfo, who were able to understand the special needs of Italian women, something which WTUL leaders were never able to grasp. Italian women who went out on strike could be just as militant as Jewish women, and many were involved in altercations with strikebreakers. Furthermore, those Italian women who did work as strikebreakers seemed to have been motivated by economic necessity rather than apathy regarding unionism. Both Jewish and Italian women did not seem to draw a great deal of support from their respective communities, or from the press, which partly discounts the theory that Jewish women were inherently more conscious of the need for unions.

Although organizers saw Jewish and Italian women as quite different, both groups did require special consideration from organizers due to language barriers and had similar experiences during the strike. The idea that Jewish women were avid unionists while Italian women were indifferent to the cause was solely a creation of the press and subsequent writers on the strike who ascribed certain cultural traits to each group, and failed to realize that Jewish and Italian women actually had quite comparable experiences.

Chapter IV: *Italian Women in Unions, 1910-1914*

At the conclusion of the Shirtwaist Makers' strike it was realized that more attention needed to be devoted to the question of dealing with Italian women in the garment trades. While the AFL seemed relatively content with the level of commitment that Italians gave to the labor movement, the WTUL and Arthur Caroti continued to approach Italian women through social events, classes, and home visits during the four years following the strike. As a result of having Italian organizers to overcome the language barrier, Italian women became increasingly active in the unions. Many of the garment strikes between 1910 and 1913 reinforced the idea that Italian women were not apathetic in comparison to their Jewish coworkers, but merely required an approach that met their needs from organizers.

After the strike the AFL favored the view that Italians did have an interest in trade unionism, despite what many believed. An article in the *Federationist* pointed out that the perceived problem with Italian unionists was that they functioned entirely in the Italian language. Italian workers, then, were less "Americanized" than other immigrants and were seen as less likely to identify a common cause with other workers. The Shirtwaist Makers' strike and Cloakmakers' strike served as evidence of how Italians were less Americanized because they had their own locals, delegates, and headquarters. Many other workers believed that Italians lacked an interest in trade unionism because they did function separately from other strikers. The author, J.W. Sullivan, suggested that other wage-earners needed to recognize the fact that Italians did not lack a commitment to trade unionism. The common perception that Italian workers came to the United States to save money in order to return to Italy to live in luxury was not substantiated by the fact that hundreds of thousands of Italians immigrated every year and several million never returned. The impoverished conditions in Italy from which these immigrants, mainly peasants, had escaped illustrated why Italians desired to remain in the United States.[1] These Italian workers were committed to improving their working conditions as their long-term goals were to work in the United States.

One indication of Italian activism in trade unions was that Italian language newspapers gave as much space to the trade union movement as English language newspapers did. In November 1910, for example, the *Giornale Italiano* published a notice in the "Help Wanted" section that "it will decline to publish calls for that class of non-unionist to whom colloquial language applies a title more expressive than elegant" (that is, "scab").[2] The *American Federationist* praised this notice as reflecting the strong solidarity of the Italian workers. Italians were also active during strikes, although within their own locals. The *Federationist* discussed how the Italians were intensely interested during the shirtwaist strike "and made common cause with the other strikers, in so far as difference of language permitted ... on the whole the rank and file showed that trade unionism was the necessary aim of all their members at the present time."[3] The problems seemed to lie only in the perceptions of other workers that Italians were unsympathetic to trade unions. These views, as expressed in the *American Federationist*, reflected the "official" viewpoint of the AFL officials, but the WTUL still experienced difficulties with organizing Italian workers on another level.

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[1] J.W. Sullivan, "The Italian as a Trade Union Factor," *American Federationist* 17 (December 1910), 1075-1077.

[2] "In the Right Spirit," *American Federationist* 17 (November 1910), 992.

[3] *Ibid.*, 992.

A conference in New York in 1913, at which the guest speaker was Vittoria Racca of the University of Rome, was created to study the settlement houses in Italian communities. Settlement houses were established in immigrant communities as places where members of the community could participate in various activities and in social programs that would assist them in raising their standards of living.[4] The settlement house movement, like the WTUL, was largely directed by Protestant, middle and upper class women, and these women shared the common goal of trade unionism as one means of helping immigrant workers.[5] Potential unionists were often drawn from the settlement houses, thus the success of the settlement house was intertwined with that of the union. As Professor Racca explained, the settlement buildings needed to be simpler, "not so fine that the Italians do not feel at home."[6] As well, he felt that the organizers needed to learn about "customs, habits, employments, amusements, traditions, they should feel the spirit of the Italians and see things from the Italian's point of view."[7] He cited an example of a worker introducing the Italians to basketry, which they did not like, and suggested that a knowledge of what kinds of handwork they were interested in was needed.[8] Finally, Professor Racca argued that each mother should be kept better informed of what her children were doing in the settlement houses "so that she may understand why her daughter is out after dark, which is quite against Italian custom."[9] Professor Racca's assertions about what was needed in settlement houses seemed to have been adopted in varying degrees by the WTUL. League members certainly expressed a desire to learn more about Italian culture on one level, but did not actually take many steps to do so. They were more likely to impose their own values on these workers.

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[4] Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, 84. See also Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1910).

[5] Elisabeth Stern wrote that around the beginning of the twentieth century, many settlement houses refused to hire Jewish workers, even if educated. Stern, *I Am a Woman--and a Jew*, 44.

[6] "The Italian and the Settlement," *Survey*, 12 April 1913, 58.

[7] *Ibid.*, 59.

[8] *Ibid.*

Immediately after the strike, the WTUL broached the subject of how to deal with the Italian question. At an executive meeting on January 19, 1910 Helen Marot proposed that they act upon the interest created by the strike to further their goal of permanent organization of Italian women. An informal conference had already been called to assist Arthur Caroti during the strike, but little was done toward the long term goal of organization until the strike ended.[10] The first meeting for Italian waist makers was held in March 1910, with fifty workers in attendance, far less than expected. Caroti was encouraged, however, by their interest and was optimistic that the next meeting would see more participants.[11] He recommended at this point that a committee be formed composed of representatives from the WTUL, the settlement houses, and an Italian from "the rank and file." A sub-committee of Italians from different trades would also be formed with open air meetings to be held outside the factories at the closing hour.[12] A representative from the Excavator's Union further urged, in an executive meeting held on April 20, 1910, that men's unions should be visited so that they could be educated and urged to bring the women of their families into the unions.[13] A second meeting, on May 14, 1910, was also poorly attended due to poor advertising, but a subsequent settlement house meeting attracted fifty people.[14] Thus, the WTUL had some ideas regarding methods to bring Italian women into the unions, but it seems that no definitive action was taken in pursuing these options until the end of 1910.

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[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 19 January 1910, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 528).

[11] Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, 23 March 1910, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY papers (reel 1, frame 553).

Arthur Caroti, as the dominant organizer, initiated a twofold strategy to deal with this issue beginning in December 1910: to draw women into the union through the family by speaking to Italian men and women, and to organize social events to attract women into the unions.[15] In January 1911, Caroti requested that the WTUL provide a separate, Italian-speaking office for Italian women in the Waist Makers' industry--a request which was granted.[16] With an office, Caroti was able to establish a meeting place for those women interested in learning about trade unionism or in socializing with other workers.

Caroti continued to hold meetings in Italian neighborhoods to help reach the women through the men in their lives. These meetings also ensured that the WTUL held the interest of those already belonging to unions, and he also promoted the recruitment of new members by giving them "homeopathic doses of trade unionism."[17] Other members of the WTUL also visited the women themselves in their homes to explain to them the advantages of trade unionism and "its close connections with their home life."[18] It is unlikely that these WTUL members could speak Italian, therefore Caroti was presumably able to accomplish more than League members. The fact that WTUL realized that they needed to make unionism relevant to the lives of Italian women, instead of trying to impose their own values on these women, was a significant departure from tactics used the previous year.

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[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Board, 20 April 1910, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 565).

[14] President's Monthly Report 14 May 1910, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 585).

[15] "What the New York Women's Trade Union League is Doing to Organize Women," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 1 (December 1910): 5.

[16] *Ladies Garment Worker* 2 (January 1911): 5.

Caroti also recognized that many women needed social events to "sugar coat" the pill of unionism to better "swallow and slowly assimilate the spirit of cooperative action."[19] This method can best be explained by Caroti himself:

> The history of labor unionism in Italy shows that it was a growth outward from purely social groups. It was an evolution. First men came together for mutual pleasure and recreation. In time their common interests bound them. Slowly the trade union grew. Among the women it will have to be the same. The spirit of cooperation will have to grow from a basis which the girls understand. That is; the social. When they get used to the idea of organization in this way--the reason does not matter--we will have gone a long step. To get them to stand together for any purpose of their own, independent of the influence of their masters, is something. They will absorb the spirit. In time--the union ideals.[20]

The Italian Women's Mutual Benefit Society was formed in December 1910 for women to enjoy music, recitations, and dancing, without having to listen to talk of unions. One of the incentives provided to Italian working women was a "Sick Benefit Scheme" which Italian women showed a "hearty and unlooked for interest in."[21] Using the dues of ten cents a month, doctors were also employed to see members at no charge. The WTUL also debated over whether to have marriage benefits or strike benefits, deciding in favor of the latter.

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[17] President's Monthly Report, 14 May 1910, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 585).

[18] "What the New York Women's Trade Union League is Doing to Organize Women," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 1 (December 1910): 5.

[19] Spadoni, "The Italian Working Women," 129.

[20] *Ibid.*

Italian women were initially a little suspicious, and could be overheard having conversations such as the following:

> "What's it for? Why did they wish us to have a good time?"
> "Oh, come on, join; it can't hurt you. It's only ten cents, and if you get sick you'll get a doctor and medicine, and afterward they're going to give us clothes and get us jobs and get us more money."
> "Sure I'll join."[22]

For many women, the benefits of the Society were sufficient to warrant joining and, after a year in existence, the Society could boast of two hundred regular members. Organizers felt ready to broach the subject of unionism at this time and, under the direction of Mrs. Walter Weyl of the WTUL, regular lectures were commenced on topics such as hygiene, working conditions, and economics. The WTUL made no attempts to disguise the motive behind these lectures of educating women on trade unionism.[23] A second club, the Italian Girls' Industrial League, was organized specifically for factory workers. This new group had thirty-five members, who were being trained as leaders of Italian working women, but only lasted for one year.

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[21] "What the New York Women's Trade Union League is Doing to Organize Women," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 1 (December 1910): 5.

[22] Spadoni, "The Italian Working Women," 130.

[23] *Ibid.*

The WTUL also addressed the need to overcome the language barriers by teaching English to Italian women, but did closely link these classes with the union. As Agnes Aitken wrote in her series of articles in *Life and Labor*, cards outlining the aims of the WTUL in Italian were widely distributed to draw women into the League. These cards advertised English classes, and promised parties, music, books, and trips to the park for those showing a union card.[24] The cards were given to women on a list drawn from the records of those who had received milk during the garment strikes. In this manner, it could be ensured that only those who had already expressed an interest in the union were approached, as the Italian Women's Mutual Benefit Society targeted those who had not necessarily shown themselves in sympathy with the union. Six classes were eventually formed in different neighbourhoods in the homes of willing Italians. Aitken reported various responses from the families of these women. In one home the mother said "Let my daughter go to a meeting where there is music? Give me $2.00 and I will let her go." Another woman said, however, "If you will learn me to write my name, I will kiss your feet."[25] In general, the Italian women (and four men) were seen as enthusiastic and eager to learn. The major benefit to the Italian students was considered to be the fact that they would gain confidence and realize the importance of learning English.

It was also hoped that the classes would give WTUL members an opportunity to learn more about Italian culture and "the life and point of view of the Italians" through close personal contacts. It is questionable whether the WTUL members actually desired to learn about Italian women themselves, except to devise a strategy for educating Italian women about trade unions, as this quote illustrates:

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[24] Agnes Aitken, "Teaching English to Our Foreign Friends: Part II, Among the Italians," *Life and Labor* 1 (October 1911): 309.

[25] *Ibid.*, 311.

> In the process of adjustment it is vitally important that what is good in their customs be retained while at the same time it is equally essential that the family realize the necessity of understanding the conditions under which they work and live in this country.[26]

The tone of this statement almost suggests an attitude of superiority on the part of the WTUL in desiring to convince Italian women to discard what was "bad" in their customs, and change their ways of life. Once Italian women could understand English, in any case, one of the barriers to their unionization was removed. Furthermore, as Aitken explained, the WTUL could identify and recruit leaders to assist them in their efforts:

> But more than all these, the personal contact makes it possible to detect those who by inherited ability are best fitted to be leaders. For as it is true of all peoples, it is true of the Italians, that the ultimate force which makes for their betterment lies within themselves. The work of the Women's Trade Union League is but a means to help them find themselves.[27]

While the League provided English classes with the stated aim being to learn about Italian culture, it seems that League members had ulterior motives of using this knowledge to design better methods of organizing Italian women.

In conjunction with all these activities, organizers were also supposedly working to promote understanding between Jewish and Italian workers so that employers could not use Italians "against the more strongly organized Jewish workers, for the employers own profits and the injury of the Union."[28] No evidence of the nature of this work exists, however. In considering that the majority of work done with Italian women was with Italian women alone, not with Italian and Jewish women together, it is unlikely that substantial work was done or gains made in this regard.

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[26] *Ibid.*, 309.

[27] *Ibid.*, 311.

In the period between the end of the Shirtwaist Makers' strike until 1911, as the WTUL was attempting to educate Italian women workers, a number of strikes erupted in which Italian women were quite active. This fact illustrates that Italian women were already capable of fighting to protect their interests. Clara Massilotti, for example, became an organizer in the garment strike in Chicago.[29] She was interviewed by Professor Katharine Coman of Wellesley College about her experiences as a forewoman in charge of ten "greenhorns," both Jewish and Italian. Her employer, "Mr. G.," openly acknowledged to her that he was exploiting his workers, saying that he did not want experienced help because "these greenhorns ... they cannot speak English and they don't know where to go ... and I let them work hard, like the devil, and those I get for less wages."[30] Massilotti fought constantly against Mr. G., who decreased the pay, asking him "Ain't you ashamed?" Massilotti refused to tell the employees that he had cut their pay, and demanded that he break the news to them. When asked why she cared so much about the "greenhorns," she retorted "I am an Italian girl myself. I can speak myself good English, but if I could not, you would do the same to me."[31]

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[28] "What the New York Women's Trade Union League is Doing to Organize Women," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 1 (December 1910): 5.

[29] "The Girls' Own Stories," *Life and Labor* 1 (February 1911): 52.

[30] Katherine Coman, "Bricks Without Straw: The Story of an Italian Girl Among the Striking Garment Workers in Chicago," *Survey*, 10 December 1910, 425.

After a few weeks of working at an impossible speed for terrible wages, Massilotti led all her charges out on strike, explaining to them:

> The first whistle we hear in the window, that means for us to strike. You cannot work for twelve cents a coat, and I cannot baste thirty-five coats in a day, and we will all go on strike.[32]

She illustrates that Italian women could be class conscious, as her major concern was not her own wages, but those of her charges. Massilotti recognized that the exploitation of these women workers stemmed from their inability to understand English, illustrating once again how language proved to be the greatest barrier to unionizing Italian women. Rather than accept her much higher wages at the expense of her coworkers, she chose to protect their interests.

Italian women and men in a Cleveland garment strike in 1911 were exceptionally innovative and courageous in their work to convince others not to act as strikebreakers. Some manufacturers prevented conflicts between strikers and strikebreakers by housing strikebreakers in the factories and hiring guards. One night a dozen Italian singers armed with guitars and mandolins gathered under the windows where the strikebreakers were sleeping and sang to the strikebreakers in Italian. According to the report in the *Ladies' Garment Worker*, the guards were charmed by the music, as were the strikebreakers, who dropped down the occasional note to the singers. When the police asked what was contained in the notes, one of the men answered "We maka love song. They lika vera much. Dropa down note, aska play more." The next day, when all the strikebreakers walked out, the guards discovered that the singers had sung the story of the dispute and explained why the strikebreakers should join them. The notes of "appreciation" actually read "We understand now, and when the guards are not watching, we will slip out and help you win."[33] Wives of the male strikers were also active. Two Italian women visited the home of another woman to persuade her not to "scab," and a guard shot at one of the women four times. The other woman went to assist her and was told by the guard she would also be shot if she moved any closer, to which she responded "Shoot if you must, but I can't let a sister stay there bleeding." As she moved closer, she too was shot, but returned to strike duty as soon as the doctor treated her wounds.[34]

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[31] *Ibid.*, 426.

[32] *Ibid.*, 427.

The famous fire that broke out in the Triangle factory on March 25, 1911 claimed 146 lives and provided an even greater impetus to workers to fight for better working conditions. When sewing materials caught on fire, perhaps due to cigarette ashes of a negligent employee, many workers were trapped in the building because the owners had locked them in to prevent them from stealing. Some workers got out in the slow elevators, but others attempted to escape by jumping out of the building from the 8th, 9th, and 10th floors. The *New York World* described the scene:

> The first signs that persons in the street knew that these three top stories had turned into red furnaces in which human creatures were being caught and incinerated was when screaming men and women and boys and girls threw themselves into the streets far below. They jumped with their clothing ablaze. The hair of some of the girls

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[33] "A Triumph for Democracy," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 2 (September 1911), 5.

[34] *Ibid.*

> streamed up aflame as they leaped. Thud after thud sounded on the pavements.[35]

The Triangle factory was located on the edge of the Italian quarter, which had half a million inhabitants. The fire occurred just as these workers had finished their work days and thousands, nearly all Italians, were heading home, as Martha Bensley Bruere described the scene:

> ... the mass of workers pressed in and in on the fire lines, and what can policemen do against a whole quarter mad with terror at seeing its sisters and daughters burned before its eyes? Can you quiet a man who thinks that the charred mass over which a merciful blanket has been thrown, is his newly married wife?[36]

The reactions of Italian workers were matched by the Italian press after *L'Araldo* reported forty-three Italians among the victims. In one family, a man had lost his mother and two sisters in the fire.[37] One unnamed Italian paper called for revenge: "Demolish the place of the Triangle Waist Company. If you don't do this, another disaster may strike you also."[38] The owners of the Triangle were acquitted of all charges, however, and paid only one week's wages as compensation to the families of the victims.

It could be argued that the Triangle Fire helped to raise the consciousness of all Italian workers, especially those who witnessed the event. Certainly, many of the garment workers who were interviewed in the 1970s discussed the Triangle Fire whether they had worked in the shirtwaist industry or not, which suggests the enormous impact that the fire had on many working women. Yetta Altman commented that, as a result of the fire, unionizing workers "started to get better a little bit 'cause a lot of people took interest."[39] The tremendous effect of the fire was evident in the mourning of the Italian community on each anniversary of the fire, as Pauline Newman noted three years later:

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[35] Sochen, *Consecrate Every Day*, 13.

[36] Martha Bensley Bruere, "The Triangle Fire," *Life and Labor* 1 (May 1911): 137.

[37] Furia, "Immigrant Women and Industry," 167.

[38] *Ibid.*, 169.

> On March 28th Webster hall was filled with men and women who came to listen to the commemoration of the Triangle fire victims. The weather was in accord with the feelings of the assembled. All day it was raining, shedding tears for the dead--weeping for the victims of 1911. Both DiNeri and Consiglio have, with eloquence, paid tribute to the dead and pictured the terrible catastrophe of three years ago. Both have condemned the action of the courts in regards to the survivors of the victims. Both have pointed out the great need for labor legislation and for labor representatives in the courts. Both speakers were received with great enthusiasm.[40]

Whether the fire provided the final catalyst for many more Italian women workers to join the union is uncertain, but Italian women did become more active in the strikes that ensued.

The Lawrence Mill strike is one example of a case where both Italian men and women were active in the strike and sustained the struggle. The workforce was composed of fifty-two different ethnic groups speaking forty-five different languages, with the largest numbers being Italian, German, French-Canadian, and "American."[41] The Massachusetts government passed a law reducing the work hours for women and children to fifty-four a week from fifty-six.[42] Manufacturers were bitter about these lost hours of labor and cut the pay proportionately by about twenty-five to thirty cents a week. The rents that employers charged the workers were so high that even present levels of pay were insufficient. As one Italian man, Ulsiano Luciano, told a *New York Times* reporter, he was paid $5.76 a week to support his wife and five children and his rent was $1.75 for two small rooms.[43]

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[39] Interview with Yetta Altman.

[40] Pauline Newman, "Our Women Workers," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 5 (May 1914): 26-27.

[41] *New York Times*, 16 January 1912, 1.

[42] The average work week, according to the U.S. Department of Labor was fifty-six hours, but nearly a quarter of the workers in Lawrence worked more than that because it was the only way that they could raise their wages. See Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 427.

Italian, Polish and Lithuanian workers, anticipating a reduction in pay, voted on January 10 and 11, 1912 to strike if this was the case. On Friday, January 12, after receiving their pay envelopes, 500 workers in the Wood and Washington mills stormed through the mills breaking windows, destroying equipment and cloth, and urging others to join.[44] Thousands more joined the rioting and stormed the Ayer mills carrying a large Italian flag and many smaller American flags.[45] By the end of the day, 10,000 workers were on strike--a spectacle described by one contemporary as "the melting pot boils over."[46] The next day, about a thousand strikers met at City Hall and Joseph Ettor, an Italian member of the Executive Council of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), emerged as a leader.[47] By that evening, twenty thousand workers were on strike and Mayor Scanlon called in 250 militia troops.[48]

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[43] *New York Times*, 1 February 1912, 3.

[44] "Two Hours, Reduced Wages, and a Strike," *Survey*, 27 January 1912, 1633.

[45] *New York Times*, 13 January 1912, 7.

[46] Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *I Speak My Own Piece: Autobiography of "the Rebel Girl"* (New York: Masses and Mainstream Inc., 1955), 123.

[47] The AFL had never shown any interest in organizing the foreign-born workers in Lawrence, thus the IWW quickly stepped in to organize the strikers. This eventually led to a power struggle between the two groups with the WTUL, who had opened a relief office, caught in the middle.

The Italian, Polish and Lithuanian strikers were asked in church the first Sunday not to incite any violence on the picket lines on Monday.[49] Father Mariana Milaneise of the Holy Rosary Church, the largest Italian church in the city, pledged to visit the picket lines to prevent any problems. The mill owners, mistaking the loyalties of the church leaders, approached Catholic church leaders to ask them to convince the strikers to return to work after it seemed unlikely that a quick settlement would be reached. Unlike the Shirtwaist Makers' strike, however, the Church firmly backed the strikers, probably because the tithes of mill workers were the sole financial supports of the Church. Church leaders thus recognized that wages increases gained in the strike would mean that their parisioners could pay their tithes and live adequately. Father Mariana Milaneise, after receiving a letter from William Wood, president of the American Woolen Company, "urged his congregration to stand firm, and remain on strike."[50]

Throughout the strike, the main pattern of violence was that of police and hired milita men assaulting strikers. The strikers formed a large chain, rather than picketing in small clusters like the shirtwaist makers, and stayed at a distance from the mill. These strategies helped to prevent incidences of strikers being singled out and harassed or beaten by the police. On January 29, however, an Italian women, Anna Lopizzo (also spelled LaPizza) was shot and killed by a soldier. Ettor and Arturo Giovannitti, his assistant, were arrested and charged although they had been nowhere near the scene of the crime. On February 3, the brutality on the picket lines was extended to the community when the bodies of four French-Canadian strikebreakers were found mutilated in a tenement. Another French-Canadian demanded reprisal against the Italians in the nearby district, believing them responsible.[51] What seemed to be a clear cut case to the French-Canadians, however, was complicated by the autopsy report that stated that the wounds were most likely inflicted by bayonets and a special police badge belonging to a militia man hired by the employers was found in the room of the victims.[52] It appears that the employers sought to exploit racial tensions between Italian strikers and French Canadian strikebreakers so they would not cooperate using more violent means than during the shirtwaist makers' strike. For the most part, however, ethnic divisions were uncommon, partly due to the closeness fostered among women in the tenements. As Ardis Cameron wrote:

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[48] "Two Hours, Reduced Wages, and a Strike," 1633.

[49] *New York Times*, 15 January 1912, 3.

[50] *New York Times*, 22 January 1912, 3.

> Courtyard arrangements in these heterogeneous districts often united women who shared only broken English but who offered mutual assistance and support. The cross-ethnic friendships that were nourished in this environment were sometimes hidden from male heads of household, but were important sources of strength for women. "My father," explained an Italian woman, "never knew our mother had Syrian friends. They would visit each other in the day and eventually my mother could cook like a Syrian."[53]

These relationships, then, influenced the patterns of violence during the strike.

In early February, the Italian Socialists suggested that the burden on strikers be lessened by sending the children to stay with other families for the duration of the strike--a common practice during strikes in Italy and France. A hundred and twenty children were sent to New York by train to be examined by fifteen volunteer physicians, outfitted in new clothes, and sent to temporary homes by organizers from the Lawrence Strike Committee composed of IWW and Socialist women. As described in the *Survey*, the sight of the children arriving inspired an emotional reaction from the crowd who were first silent, then began singing "Marseillaise" in many languages and cheering.[54] Hundreds more children were eventually to follow as the strike continued. The mill owners, however, were upset about the negative publicity and demanded the police stop the children from leaving. On February 24, a group of children were assembled at the railway station with a committee that included a young Italian Sunday school teacher, Tina Committa. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn described the ensuing events:

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[51] *New York Times*, 3 February 1912, 1.

[52] *New York Times*, 4 February 1912, 1.

[53] Ardis Cameron, "Bread and Roses Revisited: Women's Culture and Working-Class Activism in Lawrence Strike of 1912," *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History*, edited by Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 52.

> ... they were surrounded by police ... Children were clubbed and torn away from their parents and a wild scene of brutal disorder took place. Thirty-five frantic women and children were arrested, thrown screaming and fighting into patrol wagons. They were beaten into submission and taken to the police station. There the women were charged with "neglect" and improper guardianship and ten frightened children were taken to the Lawrence Poor Farm.[55]

These proceedings are interesting to note because Italian strikers transferred a common practice in strikes in Italy to Lawrence with a measure of success, if only initially.

Italian women continued to be active in the strike despite the police brutality. Several women leaders in the strike were given cameras to photograph neighbourhood

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[54] "Children of a Strike," *Survey*, 24 February 1912, 1791.

[55] Flynn, 128. See also "The Embargo on Strike Children," *Survey*, 2 March 1912, 1822.

"scabs" in order to ceremoniously hang up their photos at the local grocery store amid hissing and booing.[56] An "exquisitely beautiful," pregnant Italian woman made a proposal at a meeting at which the President of the IWW, William Haywood was scheduled to speak:

> Men, woman: I come speak to you. I been speaking to others. Just now tomorrow morning all women come see me half past four at Syrian Church. Tonight no sleep. You meet me at half past four, not sleep tonight. You all come with me. We go tell folks no go to work. Men all stay home. Just now all woman and girl come with me. Soldier he hurt man. Soldier he no hurt woman. He no hurt me. Me got big belly. She too (pointing at one of her friends), she got big belly too. Soldier no hurt me. Soldier he got mother. We tell all people no go work, no go work till we get more money. Just now stay on strike.[57]

The emotional response of the crowd was great and, with tears streaming down the faces of William Haywood and the other 1500 people in attendance, Haywood left the hall without making his speech. The woman's bravery and optimism was to be shattered the next day when the police clubbed and arrested the women.

On March 14, 1912 the majority of strikers voted by a show of hands to accept the terms of the negotiations, and more than six thousand women were members of the IWW after the settlement. The strike illustrated, moreover, that Italian women were capable of being labor activists when the conditions were right. Both Italian men and women joined together in the strike effort, which signalled that Italians were most successful when organizing together, marching side by side for the benefit of their families. It must be emphasized that Italian women were not commanded by their husbands and fathers during the strike, but worked closely together with men while still devising their own unique strategies. Italian women made tremendous sacrifices by sending their children away and sustaining themselves on even less than their meagre mill salaries. They were also actively involved not only in picketing, but in organizing, often at the risk of personal injury. The Lawrence case certainly shatters many perceptions about Italian women and demonstrates that having an Italian organizer, while important in achieving the final victory, did not necessary provide Italian women with the impetus to strike--that came solidly from the workers themselves. The Lawrence strike, more than any other, strongly influenced workers in New York and convinced Italians in other trades that they could also put an end to their exploitation. From this strike onwards, Italian women and men became far more aggressive.

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[56] Cameron, "Bread and Roses Revisited," 49.

[57] Leslie Marcy and Frederick Sumner Boyd, "One Big Union Wins," *International Socialist Review* 12 (April 1912), 625.

On January 1, 1913, close to two hundred thousand workers in white goods, wrapper and kimono, shirtwaist and dress trades in New York went on strike, including thousands of Italian women who were more militant than they had been in previous disputes. One Italian grandmother explained the many injustices she had suffered that caused her to walk out:

> "Me sick of the boss, me sick of work, me sick go hungry most time. Look!" and she showed me the little finger on her right hand. The bone was worn, the finger twisted into hook shape. "Cotton, cotton, all the time, cotton. I keep on the finger for 16 years. For 16 years me make buttonholes by hand. One hundred and fifty a day, when me want to make $1.25 me work quick, quick like one steam engine. Me bite, bite, look!" She opened her mouth. Her front teeth were completely worn out and decayed. "You see, you no understand. Every buttonhole me make me must bite together with me teeth, me must do this quick, quick so look nice and no take too much time, me no can spare time when work is busy. Me eyes they hurt, me can no see much now. Me sick, me tired, me can stand no longer, that's why me all strike."[58]

Many Italian women used umbrellas as weapons and several poked policemen in the backs with the umbrellas when they were denied entry to the factory they were picketing.[59] At a protest march, police attempted to push back the strikers and an Italian woman turned to one policeman and said "We have a right to march peacefully," for which she was beaten.[60] On January 7, a crowd of five hundred Italian women gathered outside a factory waiting for the strikebreakers to finish. These strikebreakers were removed from the factory each night by car. When the strikebreakers emerged from the factory that day, the pickets rushed forward, shouting, "and one or two of them dodged below the arms of the policemen trying to clutch the occupants of the automobile by the hair ..."[61] On January 11, Italian and Polish women were arrested for creating a disturbance outside a shop. Each was fined five dollars, but since only one woman could pay her fine, the rest were led off to jail as they sang "Marseillaise."[62] Many Italians who had never before been organized because they worked in small neighbourhood shops also joined the strike effort in solidarity with other employees.

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[58] Furia, "Immigrant Women and Industry," 188.

The determination of the strikers was best illustrated at a January 18 meeting of three or four thousand Italian women who were read the settlement that had been negotiated between the employers and the union by Pasquale Di Neri of the ILGWU.[63] The reaction of the crowd was hostile and several representatives of the IWW stood up and shouted

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[59] *Ibid.*, 189.

[60] *Ibid.*, 197.

[61] *Ibid.*, 190.

[62] *New York Times*, 12 January 1913, 3.

[63] This was described by Di Neri as the "largest gathering of Italian girls ever held in the city in connection with a strike." *New York Times*, 19 January 1913, 3.

"frame-up" and said that they had been "sold-out" by the AFL.[64] Many others joined the cries that they had been sold out, and a woman wailed that "there would be less bread for her children."[65] According to the *New York Call*, the crowd became menacing and Di Neri told the women to disperse and get their working cards at a nearby hall before he slipped out a back entrance.[66] At a general meeting the next day, the Italians in the audience also expressed their displeasure and refused to applaud the call to return to work.[67] Despite the cautions of organizers that workers might fail to achieve better conditions for years if they rejected the settlement, thousands of Italian workers rejected the strike agreement, referred to as the "Protocol," and the pay increase and benefits it allowed for them and remained out on strike.[68]

When the final protocol was agreed upon, it was printed and signed in Italian, English and Yiddish, reflecting the contributions of these dominant groups in the strike.[69] The strike was successful largely due to the activism of Italian strikers, and resulted in the formation of the Italian Dressmakers' Local 89. Gertrude Barnum of the ILGWU acknowledged the shift in Italian women's involvement in unions from the shirtwaist strike, when some did not strike, to the 1913 strike:

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[64] *New York Times*, 19 January 1913, 3.

[65] *New York Call*, 20 January 1913, 3 as quoted in Furia, "Immigrant Women in Industry," 195.

[66] *New York Call*, 19 January 1913, 3 as quoted in Furia, "Immigrant Women in Industry," 195. See also *New York Times*, 19 January 1913, 3.

[67] *New York Times*, 20 January 1913, 2.

[68] *Ibid.*

[69] S. Polakoff, "How the Protocol Works in the Waist and Dress Industry," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 4 (May 1913), 3.

> In the strike which the girls in the white goods industry [shirtwaist strike] started three years ago the Italian workers played the part of strikebreakers and defeated the movement. But now the Italians are all in the union, and they will stay on strike until the union's demands for better wages and better working conditions are met.[70]

It was clearly recognized by organizers that the protocol, which represented a new era in labor negotiations, would not have been achieved without the activism of Italian women strikers.

In general, there were also many examples outside of these strikes of individual Italian women who actively fought for better pay and working conditions. Angelina Wanderling is perhaps the best example of an Italian woman who recognized the need for unions, and shattered contemporary perceptions that Italian women were apathetic. When she started working at one shop, she was to earn four dollars a week with a fifty cent raise after two weeks. Angelina was traditional in the sense that she brought her pay envelope home to her mother unopened, but after two weeks she did shake it to make sure that it contained the coins that signified her promised raise. When she realized there were no coins in her envelope, she confronted her employer:

> I says "You told me after two weeks you were going to give me a fifty cent raise." "Oh," he says, "the bookkeeper forgot," he says, "you'll get it next week." I says, "Oh no, I want it this week--you promised me and I want it." And which he did, he gave it to me.

She worked in that position for two years, all the while demanding raises from her boss "because I understand that I did quite a bit of work. I'm not a lazy person." When she quit, she was earning nine dollars a week, evidence that she was, as she claimed, "a fighter."

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[70] *New York Times*, 11 January 1913, 7.

Angelina often felt frustrated, however, by the conditions in the shops and by her apathetic coworkers from unspecified ethnic backgrounds:

> It was a non-union shop, you had to do what the bosses would tell you, if not they would say "don't come in tomorrow." And no one would protect you. But I was a fighter, I always fought. I didn't worry because if I didn't work, I didn't have to pay board ... They [her coworkers] were so grateful that they had a place to work and earn a little money. They didn't stick together. Everyone was for themselves. And I was about the youngest there and I would tell them "Let's ask the boss for more money, let's get together. If you don't want to do something don't be afraid, all he can do is 'you, leave the shop.' You are young. You go different place--there were so many places to work ... Some were married, they had children, they had to work there. But I wasn't that type, I was aggressive.

She explained her own reasons for desiring a union: "I was always aggressive. I always wanted to make more money for the simple reason when you make more money you can buy better food, you can live better ... God bless the union." Angelina quit working when she married but was forced to work during the Depression. Retaining her same spark, she led a strike in 1932.[71]

Grace Gelo, while active in the union in her own right when she was working, managed to stay involved with the union through the activities of her husband. Grace said her husband helped to found the Italian local 89 to alleviate problems caused by language differences:

> ... the Jewish people were having a meeting and they were holding the meeting in Jewish. The Italian people didn't understand--they couldn't speak good English--so they decided "let's have one in Italian so we can understand our own language."

It was not due to dislike or prejudice, Grace emphasized, but "the language barrier." She herself joined a union after enduring employment at a shop that was "a slavery." Grace kept in touch with the affairs of the union and involved in the planning even after she had a family to take care of. She engaged in long conversations on many topics with her husband, and stated that they were "in complete harmony in everything, in every respect."[72] Grace, while traditional in the sense that she quit work after she married, had a strong influence within the union because her husband valued her opinions and sought her advice. Angelina Wanderling and Grace Gelo represent only a few Italian women who fought for better wages and working conditions, unfortunately there are few sources that contain information on the thousands of other Italian women activists.

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[71] Interview with Angelina Wanderling.

Ironically, by 1913, some leaders of the WTUL became frustrated with organizing immigrant women. Melinda Scott was appointed in 1910 to organize "American" workers and created an English-speaking local of the waist and dress makers' and of the neckwear makers'. Helen Marot and Scott were encouraged by the success of these locals and Marot proposed to the Board that the League should concentrate its energies on "American" women instead: "In every trade where Miss Schneiderman has been organizing she finds that it is the bigger shops and the better-paid workers that control the situation and that the work in these shops is done almost entirely by American girls."[73] She cited the poor record that Rose Schneiderman had in sustaining the interest of Jewish workers after the strike. Many executive members did not, however, share her view as, in the past, Jewish women had proven themselves to be the most active in the union, whereas American women were totally apathetic.[74] Mary Dreier was convinced, however, that this position was sound and Schneiderman was essentially forced into resigning as the Jewish organizer.

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[72] Interview with Grace Gelo.

[73] Dye, *As Equals and As Sisters*, 116.

Some members of the League also felt that the participation of Italian women in the 1913 strike had been poor and were discouraged by the disbanding of the Italian Girls' Industrial League. Helen Marot headed the drive to end the League's work with Italian women. Her patronizing attitude is evident in this statement:

> The Italian girls and women ... are the oppressed of the race, absolutely under the dominance of the men of their family and heavily shackled by old customs and traditions. They are very much afraid of trade unions and everything that involves danger to their job either through strikers or discharge. In the shirtwaist strike they joined the strike, but failed to hold out, and were used successfully as strikebreakers, following the instructions of their priest. This was, however, largely due to the fact that they were mostly Sicilians ... They have no collective vision. They follow willingly and devotedly a leader whom they trust and the all-important thing therefore is to get the right kind of leader.[75]

Most WTUL executive members agreed, in part, with Marot that Italian women were difficult to organize due to cultural expectations. As Mary Dreier articulated at the 1913 convention: "We discovered these girls listened to speeches but when the chips were down they didn't stay out on strike, so we concluded there is no point in trying to attract them into something."[76] The contradictions in these statements are evident when considering the fact that the Italian division of the shirtwaist local remained surprisingly strong even a year after the 1913 strike and ninety percent of the members were women. The organizing committee consisted of thirty-five organizers, and meetings were being held monthly and drawing a great number of interested women.[77] Thus, Italian women did not steadily lose interest in the union after the strike. Helen Marot consequently resigned from her position as general secretary in the midst of these conflicts over working with Jewish and Italian women. As a result, the League did not devote any energies to specifically organizing Italian women after 1913 partly because Italian women lacked a representative on the Board to lobby in support of their position.

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[74] McCreesh, *Women in the Campaign*, 183.

[75] Tax, *The Rising of Women*, 223 as quoted from the National Women's Trade Union League, *Proceedings of the Third Biennial Convention* (1911).

[76] McCreesh, *Women in the Campaign*, 183.

The conflict came to a head, however, when Mary Dreier resigned as the League president in 1914 and Schneiderman and Scott were the two main contenders. Scott won by only four votes in a vote that was sharply divided along class lines: working women supported Schneiderman while middle and upper class "allies" voted for Scott.[78] The WTUL, by 1913, sharply diverged from their policies of the previous two years and, discouraged, seemed to virtually give up on organizing both Italian and Jewish women.

The WTUL made a strong effort to draw Italian women into the unions from the strike's conclusion until 1913 by forming the Italian Women's Mutual Benefit society which featured social events, English classes, and visiting families to discuss unionism. By 1913, the leaders began to lose hope of their charges' long term commitment to trade unions. The belief of organizers that they were apathetic in this regard shows that the WTUL members really did not try to understand the lives of Italian women and their culture. The leaders of the WTUL more or less retired from their work with Italian women, leaving the task to the newly formed Italian Cloakmakers' and Dressmakers' locals. Ironically, Italian women became increasingly more active in strikes in which there were Italian organizers who understood their special needs, especially after the Triangle Fire seized the passions of the Italian community and illustrated the need to fight for better working conditions. While the Lawrence strike and other strikes did demonstrate that Italian women could be just as militant in their demands as Jewish women, the process of translating the excitement displayed during strikes into a concern about issues between strikes was slower to develop. Many individual Italian women did, however, embrace the tenets of the unions, and Italian women as a group also gained an awareness of issues surrounding unionization.

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[77] Constance Denmark, "Our Women Workers," *Ladies' Garment Worker* 5 (July 1914): 24-25.

[78] Dye, *As Equals and As Sisters*, 117.

Chapter V: *Black Women in the Garment Trades, 1914-1930*

Black women were initially concentrated in domestic service professions in New York City, since employers discriminated against them for the better paid factory positions. Frustrated by the poor working conditions and wages in domestic service and due to the difficulties involved with unionizing this type of employment, some black women resorted to strikebreaking to enter the garment trades.[1] The issue of strikebreaking gained a lot of publicity during the shirtwaist makers' strike and highlighted the dilemmas facing black women workers. By the First World War, Jewish women workers had moved into more skilled positions in various trades to fill the void left by male workers active in the war effort. Italian women thus moved into the positions formerly occupied by Jewish women, and black women, mainly West Indian immigrants, found places as the lowest paid workers in the unskilled trades.

Black women found themselves in parallel situations to Italian women around the time of the shirtwaist makers' strike. The purpose of hiring black women was to undercut the wages of their coworkers, as had been the case when Italians were the newcomers to the industry. They were also often used as strikebreakers in labor disputes, and employers discouraged them from joining unions by segregating them from other workers and exploiting language differences. Finally, organizers found that they had to use special methods to draw black women into unions, just as they had with Italian women. The major difference, however, from the case of Italian women was that black women faced far greater prejudice from employers and union officials than did Italian women.[2] Employers would not even hire black women until they faced a shortage of cheap labor, and unions did not actively recruit black women for a number of years. So, while their struggles were comparable in many respects to that of Italian women, black women faced a more difficult battle. Black women's acceptance into the garment trades and unions was a slow process.

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[1] Rosalyn Terborg-Penn discussed how, by World War I, black women domestic workers were starting to organize themselves into informal unions such as the Association of Women Wage-earners. Since domestic workers were isolated in individual homes, it was difficult for them to communicate with one another and spread an awareness about unions.

Domestic work was highly unappealing to immigrant women. A contemporary social worker, Viola Paradise, suggested that Jewish women avoided working as domestic servants because they were not physically suited or trained for such work. Jewish women considered such a position degrading, and the work offered too few opportunities to meet men--supposedly the chief ambition of every Jewish woman.[3] Another writer similarly asserted that domestic work placed a damper on their ambitions to marry since they had no days off, and it curtailed the number of balls and dances they were able to attend.[4] Jewish women who were forced into domestic service often felt humiliated because, as one woman explained, "the dirtier the work, or the more physical strength was required for it, the more *proste* (lowly) it was."[5] Italian women did not enter into domestic service either; the numbers were negligible according to Louise Odencrantz.[6] Italian women avoided domestic service due to the low wages, their training in the sewing trades, and because the men in their families would not have seen it as appropriate work since they would be unchaperoned.

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[2] Italian and Jewish women were referred to as "white" in all primary documents, for example.

[3] Viola Paradise, "The Jewish Immigrant Girl in Chicago," *Survey*, 6 September 1913, 703.

[4] Elias Tobenkin, "The Immigrant Girl in Chicago," *Survey*, 6 November 1909, 193.

[5] Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 17.

Since immigrant women refused to take these positions, domestic service work was available to black women. The words of Mary White Ovington reflect the position of black women in the labor force:

> ... the colored girl in New York meets with severer race prejudice than the colored man, and is more persistently kept from attractive work. *She gets the job that the white girl does not want.* It may be that the white girls want the wrong thing, and that the jute mill and tobacco shop and flower factory are more dangerous to health than the mistress's kitchen, but she knows her mind, and follows the business that brings her liberty of action when the six o'clock whistle blows.[7] (emphasis in original)

Ninety percent of the black women in New York City were engaged in domestic work in private homes, in shops, or in boarding houses. Many unscrupulous employment agencies even recruited black women from the South, whether they were trained or not, to fill the positions in New York. According to the 1900 census, the average weekly wages for women in domestic service was $3.50, which was far less than somewhat experienced workers could earn in the factories.[8] Around the same time period, thirty-eight percent of women domestic workers worked ten hours a day, six percent worked eleven hours a day, and thirty-one percent worked twelve hours or more a day. Thus, only twenty-five percent of female domestic servants worked less than a ten hour day.[9] Since the majority of women lived in, for day workers did not become common until WWI, they were subject to the demands of employers seven days a week even if they had a scheduled day off. The living and working conditions naturally varied based on the home in which the woman was employed. Black women in domestic occupations found that it was difficult to unionize or organize themselves due to the nature of their work. They were often subjected to long hours with little free time for themselves, physically exhausting work, and poor pay. Many black women consequently desired employment in factories which had more regulated work hours and paid better.

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[6] Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 33.

[7] Ovington, *Half a Man*, 162.

[8] Elizabeth Ross Haynes, "Negroes in Domestic Service in the United States," *Black Women in United States History*, Vol. Two, edited by Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 539.

Like many Jewish and Italian women, a high proportion of black women worked after marriage due to financial need or the absence of a husband. According to one study, married black women often gave up more profitable positions as domestic workers because such employment took them away from their children for as much as fourteen hours a day.[10] Moreover, employers were disinclined to hire married black women as they refused to live in, sometimes took food for the support of their families, and had so many responsibilities in their own homes that they were too tired to work the long hours that domestic service demanded.[11] Instead, these women would take in laundry to do in their homes which paid less, but allowed them to see their children. The fact that black families were often relegated to the worst possible accommodations in the city, at a higher cost proportionate to their earnings, did not make this work easy or allow for a healthy environment for the family.[12] This situation was similar to that of Jewish and Italian women who worked in their crowded and unhealthy homes in order to take care of their children and contribute to the family income.

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[9] *Ibid.*, 547.

[10] Mary White Ovington, "The Negro Home in New York," *Charities and the Commons*, 7 October 1905, 27.

[11] Haynes, "Negroes in Domestic Service," 514.

Like Jewish and Italian girls, black girls sometimes gave all their pay to their mother, however they more often gave only a portion based on what they felt was appropriate. Since most single black women lived outside the home, as domestic workers, it was simply not feasible for them to bring money home to their mothers, especially since they hardly earned enough to live on. Thus, domestic service was the occupation available to single women, while married women worked in the home when the money was needed.

Some black women, like Jewish and Italian women, were trained in sewing or other trades. For example, between the years of 1904 and 1910, the Manhattan Trade School graduated thirty-four black women in dressmaking, hand sewing and other trades, twenty-two of whom were able to find positions in their chosen trades. Black women also took evening classes in millinery, flower making and dressmaking at a public schools procured by the Neighbourhood Work Committee for use during the summer and in the evenings as an industrial training centre for black women.[13] Other black women learned to sew at home from their mothers. Unfortunately, although some black women were trained and found positions in the sewing trades, the majority found such positions closed to them except during strikes.

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[12] "The Housing Problem and the Negro," *Charities and the Commons* 7 October 1905, 2-3.

[13] "Negroes in New York," *Survey*, 28 May 1910, 5.

It was not until the shirtwaist makers' strike that black women captured the attention of the union and WTUL. Only a handful of black women, no doubt brought in to undercut the wages of other workers, actually worked in the shirtwaist industry at the time of the strike, but nothing is known about these workers. When the strike broke out, some employers promptly advertised for black women to act as strike breakers. This move illustrated the dilemma facing black women. While strikebreaking was certainly a means by which black women could gain entrance to the garment trades, their positions were not necessarily secure at the strikes' conclusion.

The WTUL was concerned about black women undermining the union by acting as strikebreakers. When the WTUL requested that the *New York Age*, a black newspaper, not print advertisements for strikebreakers, the *Age* refused and even went as far as to recruit black women to work as ironers.[14] The reasons given in the *Age* editorial on January 20, 1910, were that black women had previously been excluded from the ILGWU:

> They not being asked amounted practically to an exclusion from the union and the workshop. Had Negro girls applied for positions and been employed, the employees who are now striking and now professing this dog-in-the-manger sistership would have immediately clamored for their discharge. More than that, we asked the philanthropic sponsor for the striking girls would the union admit Negro girls in the future without discrimination as to employment should they refrain from taking the positions now open. As yet we have received no such assurance. Could we therefore, in sense and justice, advise competent Negro girls, now idle and until now denied employment, to turn down this opportunity? Why should Negro working girls pull white working girls' chestnuts out of the fire? ... The friends and leaders of labor should consider the Negro in days of prosperity as well as those of adversity.[15]

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[14] *New York Age*, 20 January 1910, 4.

[15] *Ibid.*

While the League members requested that all workers show a solidarity based on gender, the *Age* argued that black women had been subject to too much discrimination in the past to identify with Jewish and Italian women workers.

On January 29, 1910, a letter to the editor of the *Survey* from a reader, Alfred T. White, was printed in response to the editorial on January 15 which stated that "they are willing that everyone shall belong to the union." White wrote that according to a social worker he had spoken to, "colored shirtwaist makers could not get into the union and were likewise not permitted by the union to work in the shops."[16] The editor replied with a note which stated that: "Mr. White's information about colored shirtwaist makers is undoubtedly correct."[17]

The WTUL immediately defended both itself and the ILGWU against charges of discrimination. The National WTUL President, Margaret Dreier Robins wrote the following to the editor of the *Survey*:

> In Philadelphia, two of the most devoted pickets are colored girls, for they have not only been able to persuade the girls of their own race and color to stand by their sisters, but they have also been most successful in persuading the white girls to stand by them.
>
> In the early days of the strike in New York, a colored girl went to the headquarters of the Women's Trade Union League not quite certain of her welcome, but she had only appeared in the doorway when a young Russian Jewess ran up to her, and holding out both hands said with greatest enthusiasm, "I am so glad you have joined us, I am so glad you have joined us." It is significant to add that she is now secretary of her shop committee, elected by white girls to that office.[18]

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[16] *Survey*, 29 January 1910, 588.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] *Survey*, 19 February 1910, 788.

Elizabeth Dutcher of the New York branch of the WTUL clarified this statement by asserting in the black publication the *Horizon* that:

> In New York, colored girls are not only members of the union but they have been prominent in the union. One colored girl has been secretary of her shop organization all through the strike and has been very frequently at the union headquarters doing responsible work.[19]

If she were intrusted with "responsible" work, Dutcher implies, then the WTUL could not possibly be prejudiced against black workers. In spite of the quickness of the WTUL to deny that discrimination existed in the union, no concrete evidence was provided to the contrary. These alleged black members were never identified or mentioned again by either the WTUL or by black or mainstream periodicals. It would have undoubtedly been in the best interests of the WTUL to produce any of these women in the face of charges of discrimination, but they remained anonymous.

A coalition of black and white progressives, including Elizabeth Dutcher from the WTUL and Mary White Ovington from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), formed and dubbed themselves the "Cosmopolitan Club." In a meeting held in Brooklyn on December 21, 1909, they discussed the race question, listened to arguments by Elizabeth Dutcher, William Mailly and two of the strikers, and arrived at the following conclusion:

> Resolved, That the colored citizens of Brooklyn in mass meeting assembled, protest and urge the women of color to refrain from acting in the capacity of strike-breakers in the various shirtwaist making concerns of New York city, because we regard their action as antagonistic to the best interests of labor. We further urge that in the event of the successful termination of the strike

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[19] Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, vol. II (New York: The Citadel Press, 1951), 844-845.

> organized labor exercise a proper consideration of the claims and demands of the men and women of color who desire to enter the various trades in the way of employment and the protection of the various labor unions.[20]
>
> Those familiar with negro opinion will feel the significance of this appeal from the leaders of the race. The colored girl is urged not to enter the market and underbid, accepting any chance to learn a trade, but to refrain from injuring other working women, and whenever possible, to ally herself with the cause of labor.[21]

Most of the black women who considered acting as strikebreakers would have done so for reasons of economic necessity, or to break out of the drudgery of domestic service. It seems highly unlikely that they identified with the cause of Jewish and Italian workers. The racial and religious differences alone prevented the development of a sympathy based on class similarity. Even the black middle and upper class "leaders" meeting at the Cosmopolitan Club had little more understanding of these women's lives than Jewish and Italian strikers did, or they would have recognized that black women had absolutely no obligation to support the cause of labor unions that excluded them.

In spite of all the debates about whether or not black women should act as strikebreakers, it appears that they generally chose not to do so. The specific references to "scabs" in the newspapers and periodicals more often identified Italians as the culprits. If black women had worked as strikebreakers, it probably would have been printed since public opinion was generally not favorable toward black workers and the press would likely have seized upon the opportunity to fault them for taking the jobs of others. Furthermore, the National Association for the Protection of Colored Women appeared to have assisted in

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[20] *New York Call*, 23 December 1909, 2.

[21] *New York Call*, 22 December 1909.

"preventing several hundred colored girls being (*sic*) used as strike-breakers."[22] Leonora O'Reilly of the WTUL described one case where "the bosses tried to use colored girls against their white sisters regardless of race or creed," but the union was successful "in defeating this nefarious practice of the greedy bosses."[23]

Immediately after the strike's conclusion, the WTUL unanimously passed a resolution to

> ... offer its services to the National Association for the Protection of Colored Women stating the very great desire of the League to protect the colored women workers through organization.[24]

The League initially made few attempts, however, to uphold the Cosmopolitan Club's or their own resolutions to help black women workers. Leonora O'Reilly was alone on the WTUL executive in her attempts to understand black workers to any degree, at least insofar as the written WTUL records indicate. She wrote extensively on "the Negro Question" and black education, and attended several conferences on issues facing black people. She also attended the Conference on the Status of the American Negro in May/June 1909, and was on the committee of the Second Annual Conference of the National Negro in May 1910.[25] As will be illustrated, the WTUL was not a major player in assisting black women with gaining employment in the garment trades or, later, in unionizing black women garment workers.

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[22] Meeting of the National WTUL, WTUL Papers: Margaret Dreier Robins Papers (reel 8, frame 342).

[23] *New York Call*, 8 January 1910, 1-2.

[24] Meeting of the National WTUL, WTUL papers: Margaret Dreier Robins Papers (reel 8, frame 342).

[25] See the WTUL Papers: Leonora O'Reilly Papers (reels 10 and 11).

One of the major problems that initially hindered the WTUL from assisting black workers was the discrimination they experienced from employers. Employers attributed their policies to the fact that their other employees did not want to work with black women. The WTUL held a meeting where factory workers were asked if they had any objections to working with black women, however, and none were raised.[26] Several black women were subsequently sent to factories to apply, resulting in the following conclusions as written by Helen Marot:

> After I found that girl after girl failed to secure a position I tested the situation by getting the name of a factory directly from the union and sending a girl there, when she reported back that they would not take her I called up the factory and received the reply that they still wanted workers, but did not want colored girls, they excused themselves on the ground that the other girls would not work with them. I had proven positively, through Mrs. Smith, who was doing some investigating, that there was actually no prejudice amongst the girls against the colored girls, and the prejudice was entirely on the side of the employers.[27]

The Committee on Improving Industrial Conditions of Negroes in New York City also sent a woman to a factory where she "begged permission of a certain employer to make the test, promising to leave on the first indication of trouble."[28] She started as a beginner and worked for a week, "being treated with courtesy the entire time by all the employees," before she moved on to conduct her experiment in other shops with similar results.[29]

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[26] The WTUL papers contain no record of such a meeting, but it was mentioned in the report by the Committee on Improving Industrial Conditions of Negroes in New York City. The Committee claimed to have visited the WTUL and held a conference with employees in which they stated "That they had no objection to workroom association with Negro girls." This conference appears to have been initiated by the Committee rather than the WTUL and the details are vague (that is, one can not be sure who these employees were who attended the conference or where they worked). Samuel Bishop, "Industrial Condition of Negro Women in New York City," *Southern Workman* 39 (October 1910).

[27] Secretary's Report to the Executive Board, 20 April 1910, WTUL Papers: WTUL of NY Papers (reel 1, frame 568).

According to Mary White Ovington, however, the Manhattan Trade School reported that the greatest obstacles to placing their black graduates came from women already employed in the shops. Ovington wrote that "Race prejudice has even gone so far as to prevent a colored woman from receiving home work when it entailed her waiting in the same sitting room with white women."[30] Ovington found also, though, that in her many informal chats with women workers, the vast majority were "ready to accept the colored worker," with Jewish women being especially tolerant. This study was conducted around 1910 when black women were not commonly found in the shops. It seems that any opposition from other workers was probably based on a fear that black women would undercut their wages and undermine the union. In any case, only a small, if sometimes aggressive, minority was against black women working in the garment trades.

If the other women in the shops generally did not object to working with black women, then why did employers continue to discriminate against black women who desired work in the garment trades? Obviously the legacy of slavery created the general public perception that black people were an inferior race based on their skin color. All black workers, male or female, were discriminated against during this time period, thus it was a widespread and common practice. Employers in the garment trades, however, were sometimes Jewish immigrants who did not view black people in the same manner that native-born Americans did because they did not bear witness to black people as slaves or engage in the Civil War. So, while race influenced their hiring policies, Eastern European employers, at least, did not necessarily see black women as inferior, but did view them as being different or foreign based on their darker skin color. These employers were also quite conscious of the prevailing attitudes within larger society, and instituted discriminatory policies in order to appease clients and their employees, especially those who were native-born. Skin color does not entirely explain why employers in the garment trades rejected this pool of eager workers who would work for low wages. Employers preferred Italian women, at least initially, because they were well trained in sewing, worked for lower wages than Jewish women, and were less likely to join unions because they did not speak English. Black women could speak English, which theoretically would have made them easier to organize. Once Italian women began to organize in greater numbers between the years of 1911 and 1913, they lost their chief attraction to employers--the fact that they could be exploited. The rise of Italian women union members corresponded with the beginning of World War I which produced a labor shortage. Thus, as employers began to lose their pool of cheap laborers to the unions and their skilled workers to the war effort, black women were given the opportunity to work in the garment trades.

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[28] Bishop, "Industrial Condition of Negro Women," 528.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Ovington, *Half a Man*, 162-163.

Black women gained their first foothold in the garment trades during World War I due to a shortage of male laborers. Jewish and Italian women workers, who were overwhelmingly concentrated in the textile and garment industries, advanced into the skilled and higher paid positions. Subsequently, black women began to be actively recruited to fill the void left by these women.[31] The United States Department of Labor reported that many companies which had placed an industrial boycott against black women began to advertise with signs reading "colored wanted."[32]

In some cases, however, employment did not come easily for black women and, in frustration, they resorted to strikebreaking. In Chicago, for example, black women were used to break a strike in the skirt and dress trades in 1917 because they could be paid substantially less. As a result, the union failed to win the strike and, after the strike's conclusion, five hundred black women gained positions in the trade.[33] One of the union representatives, Max Brodsky, discussed the measures that the union took to ensure the cooperation of black women in future disputes: "we decided to have them organized just like the white women and girls, so we established this particular union [local]. They are at present conscientious union girls and women. It was the policy of the union not to discriminate against the colored women who broke the strike in 1917."[34] Such open mindedness on the part of union officials proved to be rare, however.

Black women were enough in demand during the war to possess a small amount of leverage with respect to asking employers for better pay and working conditions, but they continued to have difficulties with the unions. The attitudes of the unions towards black women in these early years were described by Mary Jackson, writing for the *Crisis*, as being "evasive."[35] The AFL had ruled that affiliates could not discriminate against potential members on the basis of religion, sex, race, nationality, or political affiliation. In 1895, AFL locals were told that they would be barred as affiliates if they had clauses that discriminated against black workers. In 1900, however, around twelve AFL unions had constitutional clauses or informal agreements with their members to exclude black workers.[36] Black women were doubly discriminated against early in the century, excluded both because they were black and the few locals that allowed black members were male dominated industries, and because the AFL had no interest in organizing women. In 1911, a controversy arose over a speech by Gompers in which newspapers accused him of "reading the negro out of the labor movement." Gompers was quick to defend his position and asserted that he had "no power to do it," and even if he had the power to exclude black workers, he would not. He also pointed out that:

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[31] United States Department of Labor Women's Bureau, *Negro Women in Industry*, 6.

[32] *Ibid.*, 7.

[33] Spero and Harris, *The Negro Worker and the Labor Movement*, 337.

[34] The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, "Report of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations: Organized Labor and the Negro Worker," in *The Black Worker From 1900 to 1919*, 464.

> ... they are but a little more than half a century from a condition of slavery, and as a consequence it could not be expected that, as a rule, they would have the same conception of their rights and duties as other men of labor have in America.[37]

So, while the AFL affirmed its policy that black members were welcome, Gompers tried to explain the lack of members as due to black workers not understanding the need for unions. More likely, Gompers was not concerned with unionizing black workers until they were working in industries in more substantial numbers and threatened the interests of other workers.

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[35] Mary Jackson, "The Colored Woman in Industry," *Crisis* 1 (November 1918), 14.

[36] Foner, *Women in the American Labor Movement*, 267.

[37] Samuel Gompers, "The Negro in the A.F. of L." *American Federationist* 18 (January 1911), 35.

By the end of the war, most locals claimed they had few objections to black members and wanted black women to see the advantages of joining, yet few had black members. Black women were seen as being naive about unionism, as "beginners and, therefore, unable to deal with the situation intelligently."[38] At the war's conclusion, only a hundred black women belonged to the Ladies' Waist and Dressmakers' local out of 30,000 members. While one study argues that black women were given full equality in the ILGWU, and were often chosen as shop chairwomen in factories employing black and white women, this was seldom the case until ten years later.[39]

Any gains that were desired by black women workers had to be achieved through their own efforts. For example, black women in one shop, who were being paid substantially less than white workers, asked to join the union, and spontaneously went on strike until they received a raise. Part of the difficulties lay in the fact that black women were also serving as strikebreakers, and organizers were therefore slightly suspicious of the commitment of the black worker to the unions.

It was at this time when black women had actually found a place within the factories that various agencies decided to study black women in industry more carefully. Nelle Schwartz of the Consumers' League of the City of New York, Mary Jackson and Eva Bowles of the Young Women's Christian Organization, Rose Schniederman of the WTUL, Elizabeth

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[38] Jackson, "The Colored Woman in Industry," 14-15.

[39] Spero and Harris, *The Negro and the Labor Movement*, 338.

Walton and James Hubert of the New York Urban League, Henriette Walter of the Russell Sage Foundation, and Mrs. Percival Knauth of the Committee on Colored Workers of the Manhattan Trade School all banded together with two investigators to produce *A New Day for the Colored Woman Worker: A Study of Colored Women in Industry* in 1919. The aim of the study was declared to be that:

> ... it may lead to a better understanding and appreciation of these now voiceless and defenseless women in industry--something of their hopes, their needs, and their ideals, the potential value of Colored women workers, the economic and productive waste because of our lack of understanding of them and the unjust and undemocratic way in which the Colored women have been denied an opportunity to make a decent living under good conditions in the industrial field.[40]

The study was significant because it indicated that the WTUL was interested in black women workers.

Black women, particularly from the middle class, however, desired more action on the part of the WTUL than merely helping to produce this study. A number of black women representing organizations such as the NAACP and the National Association of Colored Women's clubs, in conjunction with Elizabeth Haynes of the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, issued a letter on behalf of black women laborers to the National WTUL.[41] The letter called the League's attention to the need to organize black women and asked for their active cooperation in doing so. Organizations which dealt specifically with black women, however, consistently remained more interested in issues involving black workers than the WTUL.

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[40] Consumer's League of the City of New York, *A New Day for the Colored Woman Worker*, 7.

[41] United States Department of Labor Women's Bureau, "Memorial on Behalf of Negro Women Laborers," in *The Black Worker From 1900 to 1919*, edited by Philip Foner and Ronald Lewis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 455.

Unfortunately, early in the 1920's, due to the collapse of war time prosperity many workers were discharged and black women were the first to lose their positions.[42] In the course of researching *A New Day for the Colored Woman Worker*, fifty-seven employers expressed their satisfaction with black women and their intentions to retain them after the war. Two years later, these employers were again visited for the purpose of determining the status of their black employees. Eleven establishments had dismissed their black workers and five had gone out of business. The remaining forty-one establishments had reduced the number of black employees by forty-two percent, in spite of their avowals to keep these women on.[43] One employer voiced a common sentiment: "They were employed solely on account of the shortage of labor and it was not the intention of the management from the beginning to retain them when white girls were available."[44]

In the garment trades the majority of black women workers were West Indian until the 1920s, and thus had much in common with Jewish and Italian women as immigrants. Overall, the breakdown of black women in industry was as follows: 60% came from the Southern United States, 28% were native to New York City, and 12% were from the West Indies. Women from the West Indies were most likely to work in the garment trades, however, because they were often able to disguise their heritage due to their lighter skin color and accents, and thus gain employment from employers who would not have otherwise hired them. These women had been trained in needlework and were often "assumed to be white by their employers."[45] Delia Bierman Terborg, for example, was of mixed blood and, being from Surinam, had an accent similar to her white coworkers. Due to her skills and the fact that she did not look black, she worked as a draper earning twenty-seven dollars a week. Delia recruited a friend from Barbados who worked as her assistant and passed herself off as being Spanish.[46] As Evadni Richards, a Jamaican immigrant, stated: "the few colored that you find in the [garment] shops were always West Indians."[46]

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[42] Eugene Gordon and Cyril Briggs, "Negro Women Workers in the U.S.A.", 3.

[43] U.S. Department of Labor, *Negro Women in Industry* (1922), 15.

[44] *Ibid.*, 11.

If employers discovered the true background of a worker, though, they were sometimes fired. In one case, Laura Tucker, who appeared to be white, was discharged after it was learned that she was black, although such distinctions seem insignificant.[47] A number of employers also knowingly hired black women "whose racial identity could not easily be recognized." These employers claimed that they were catering to public opinion, to their patrons and to the white women whom they employed by hiring women who did not appear to be black.[48] Whether these patrons actually would have complained about the work being done by women who were dark in skin color or not is uncertain. It seems that racial prejudice made it easier for women with lighter skin color to find work.

In several studies, employers complained about the work performance of black women, which may have influenced the decisions of some to replace them after the war. The

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[45] Terborg-Penn, "Survival Strategies Among African-American Women," 150.

[46] *Ibid.*

[47] Bishop, "Industrial Condition of Negro Women in New York City," 525.

[48] U.S. Department of Labor, *Negro Women in Industry*, 45.

Consumer's League of Eastern Pennsylvania surveyed 64 employers and found that:

> 23 were entirely satisfied with their colored employees, "16 thought them "slow," "careless," "lazy," or "unreliable," 5 considered them inferior to white workers, 7 were satisfied with those they had, but did not care to employ more or to try them in other departments, 2 employed them on one process, but found them unsatisfactory in other respects, principally in regularity of attendance.[49]

These statements suggest racism on the part of employers who deemed black women to be inferior workers, but it is more likely that their expectations were just too high.

Black women, being new to the garment trades, were often slower than other workers because they were inexperienced garment workers. One study explains the performance of black women:

> One of the first problems was to overcome the prevalent belief that she was capable of performing only domestic and personal service. The woman herself was conscious of her own industrial inexperience and showed a timidity which was a drawback in acquiring the assurance and speed so necessary in the factory. Handicapped by industrial ignorance, inexperience, and an acute lack of factory sense, she was suddenly launched into the world of industry during a time when "efficiency-maximum production" was the country's slogan. At the same time, industrial management had neither the time nor the experience effectively to direct and train such unprepared, immature workers. In spite of this fact, the Negro woman was under the necessity of holding her own among the white women who had the advantages of years of precedent and industrial experience and training.[50]

Like Italian and Jewish women, black women were often taught to sew in the home, but they had no knowledge of routine factory work. Employers found that black women were slower and required more training than other workers as a result of their inexperience. A report of the Committee on Improving the Industrial Conditions of Negroes in New York City argued that:

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[49] Consumer's League of Eastern Pennsylvania, *Colored Women as Industrial Workers in Philadelphia*, 15.

[50] U.S. Department of Labor, *Negro Women in Industry*, 8.

> To-day the finest seamstresses are said to come from Charleston, and the general verdict is that they are good workers except that they lack speed. A pertinent comparison illustrating this point is that Italian girls can earn two dollars per day embroidering letters on table napkins--an average of twenty letters. The best colored girl yet found for this work can make no more than eight letters per day.[51]

Consequently, while many of the problems with the performance of black women could have been alleviated in time, as they gained experience, some employers became impatient.

Attendance was a major point of contention for employers who complained that often black women did not even show up for work and that it was not unusual for all of their black employees to be absent on the same day. Many shops paid their employees at the end of the week instead of the middle as was customary, to ensure their presence until the end of the week.[52] Investigators explained the absences of black women from the workplace as being due to the fact that the women lacked industrial experience and routine work habits.[53] Since the work was seasonal and often ceased without warning, the workers followed the example set by the firm and were unreliable in their working habits.[54] It seems more likely, though, that many women merely struggled under the burdens of work, childrearing, and household duties. One woman described her typical day as starting at five o'clock, at which time she prepared herself and her children for the day, worked from 7:00 until 5:30, and then cared for her children, cooked and cleaned until midnight.[55] Black women, far more than Jewish and Italian women, were required to work in the factories after marriage and thus had additional responsibilities. Employers also reported a high turnover in staff when they employed black women, which was attributed to black women taking a position to tide them over until a better position could be found.[56]

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[51] Bishop, "Industrial Conditions of Negro Women," 526.

[52] Consumer's League of the City of New York, *A New Day for the Colored Woman*, 27.

[53] U.S. Department of Labor, *Negro Women in Industry*, 50.

[54] *Ibid.*, 51.

Many reports and articles have commented on the fact that, despite the perceptions of some employers that black workers were slower, black workers on the average were found to be better educated than their white counterparts. In one study, well over half the women had completed an elementary school education, thirteen percent had attended high school for two years or less, and seven percent had completed high school or college.[57] While twenty-five percent of black women had less than an elementary school education, they compared very favourably against the sixty-three percent of white women in the same industries who had less than an elementary education.[58] Only four percent of white women had even attended high school and none had graduated. Even the most educated black women, however, encountered so much discrimination that they often chose the path of least resistance and looked for factory work. One woman, for example, was asked if she preferred sewing to the teaching position she had recently resigned from. She responded "no" for the following reason:

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[55] *Ibid.*, 21.

[56] *Ibid.*, 49.

[57] Consumer's League of the City of New York, *A New Day for the Colored Woman*, 9.

[58] *Ibid.*

> ... I just couldn't stand the treatment we got in the south, so I came north to escape humiliation and to live a fuller and freer life. And I'm happier, even though I'm finding it harder to make enough to live on.[59]

With respect to trade schools, however, many black women found these schools closed to them as they entered the garment trades in greater numbers. Black women therefore lacked the type of education that would have assisted them most in the factories. Some employers came to the realization that their black employees were "groping blindly" in their positions and admitted that it was absurd not to just have them trained in the factories. One manager acknowledged his errors and asked an investigator to put him in touch with a woman who would be capable of training and advising the black women in his shop.[60] Despite their schooling, many educated black women found skilled positions closed to them due to prejudice and were forced to seek employment in factories.

In certain areas of the garment trades, however, black women were able to retain their positions. Although a number of employers were dissatisfied with the overall work of black women, they were deemed to be competent in certain areas. Many employers agreed that black women were superior pressers, but poor operators and finishers.[61] A number of employers also emphasized that black women were especially courteous, loyal, cheerful, and "more intelligent than foreign girls."[62] Many employers also conceded that black women were, on the whole, ambitious and enthusiastic, unless they knew that there were no opportunities for advancement, in which case their ambition was dulled.[63] Their chief value to employers, though, was not performance, but the fact that they were not unionized and could be exploited.

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[59] *Ibid.*, 12-13.

[60] U.S. Department of Labor, *Negro Women in Industry*, 53.

[61] Consumer's League of New York, *A New Day for the Colored Woman*, 27.

[62] U.S. Department of Labor, *Negro Women in Industry*, 9.

Studies of black women illustrate that black women were far more likely to be exploited in terms of wages and working conditions than other workers were, and that some employers began to prefer black workers for these reasons.[64] Other workers in the industries had fought for years for certain standards in the workplace and were aware of what constituted poor conditions and were unwilling to accept them. A black woman, however, was "handicapped by industrial ignorance and drifts into conditions of work rejected by White workers."[65] The conditions, while extremely poor for all workers, were much worse for black women because they lacked the protection by unions that other workers had.

The majority of black women were underpaid compared to other workers. The garment trades paid better than many other industries that black women found work in, averaging about twelve dollars a week in 1919; but this amount was still two to five dollars a week less than the wages earned by their coworkers. Employers found it easy to pay different rates when black and white workers were segregated by workroom, and sometimes even placed black and white workers on separate floors. Segregation also lowered the wages of black women because they could not be promoted to more skilled positions without being mixed with white workers. One manager asserted: "I can not promote Negro women workers because I can't afford to provide separate accommodations for them."[66] When they worked side by side, black women often quit because they received less, and white workers were bitter probably because they feared for their own jobs if employers were able to replace them with cheaper workers.[67] Some employers broached the issue by refusing to let black women do piecework, which paid more, arguing that they were slow workers and could not earn as much. Others just flatly refused to pay the same to black workers as to white, consistently starting black women at a wage lower than the white workers.

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[63] *Ibid.*, 49.

[64] Nora Newsome, "The Negro Woman in the Trade Union Movement." *Messenger* 5 (July 1923), 762.

[65] Consumer's League of the City of New York, *A New Day for the Colored Woman*, 17.

A common perception existed among union officials and employers that "the standards of Negro life are so much lower than those of the white that the colored woman does not need as high a rate of wage."[68] It was not the case that black women actually had less needs than other women, but they did do without many necessities because they were forced to do so. Some advocates for the rights of black women workers argued that employers were ultimately hurting their businesses by paying black women so little, as this letter illustrates: "lower wages produce lower standards of living and lower efficiency, and, thus, lower output."[69]

The conditions in which black women worked were also substantially worse than those in which their coworkers suffered, especially if they labored in separate workrooms. In many cases, black women were given the poorest machines, which made it more frustrating for them to work and diminished their capacity to produce more. Some black women complained that the white workers were not only given better machines, but also material that was easier and quicker to sew with, leaving them struggling to keep up.[70] The workrooms for black workers were often darker and more unsanitary, with worse ventilation. The restrooms were likewise smaller and in worse shape for black women, if they were provided with any restrooms at all, since shops sometimes had only one toilet which was designated for white workers.[71] Black women would often sit all day on stools without backs, while white workers were given more comfortable chairs with backs. The lunchrooms for black women were also dingy, if provided, and generally they were given drinking water in a bucket with one cup to share amongst themselves. As one investigator put it: "Where there were both new and old machines, better and poorer sanitary facilities in the same shop, the poorer equipment was, as a matter of course, assigned to colored workers."[72]

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[66] U.S. Department of Labor, *Negro Women in Industry*, 45.

[67] Consumer's League of the City of New York, *A New Day for the Colored Woman*, 23.

[68] Jackson, "The Colored Woman in Industry," 14.

[69] U.S. Department of Labor, "Memorial on Behalf of Negro Women," 455.

Black women were initially forced to accept these conditions because they did not have the unions to protect them. A 1919 figure based on interviews revealed that only 12% of black women working in the garment trades belonged to unions. Their acceptance into unions was a slow process for a number of reasons. The National Urban League identified some of the reasons why black women were not inclined to organize:

(1) colored workers are not inclined to train for the advanced lines, they are content

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[70] U.S. Department of Labor, *Negro Women in Industry*, 42.

[71] Consumer's League of Eastern Pennsylvania, *Colored Women as Industrial Workers*, 40.

[72] Greene and Woodson, *The Negro Wage Earner*, 306.

> in following the less skilled occupations; (2) these Negro workers shift to domestic work when facing unemployment; (3) the white worker takes domestic employment as a last resort and sticks to the trade for advancement; (4) the colored girl is unsteady, lacks appreciation of trade lines; (5) Negroes are not informed on trade unionism and employers take advantage of this fact to make colored workers feel their incompetency.[73]

These assumptions were true only in part. Black women did not occupy unskilled positions by choice, but rather were forced into these positions due to lack of experience in the industry and prejudice on the part of employers. Some did advance to skilled positions, and could be found working in the capacities of examiners, forewomen, pressers, and power machine operators. It was commonly assumed that black women did not aspire to become machine operators, though at least one employer stated that his black employees preferred to work as operators.[74] Black women did shift to domestic work when conditions became intolerable in the garment trades, but only under extreme circumstances. Contrary to popular belief, they expressed the same aversion to domestic work as immigrant women did and sought to escape from the long hours, the confinement, and having a "personal boss."[75] Aside from these reasons, the pay was also substantially better in the factories than for domestic work. Only a few women interviewed in one study said that they would ever consider returning to domestic work and only because they enjoyed not having to pay room and board.[76]

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[73] National Urban League, *Negro Membership in American Labor Unions*, 72-73.

[74] Consumer's League of the City of New York, *A New Day for the Colored Woman*, 15.

[75] *Ibid.*, 11.

[76] Consumer's League of Eastern Pennsylvania, *Colored Women as Industrial Workers*, 29.

The fact that few black women were educated in the principles of trade unionism was the main barrier to organizing them. Seventy-one percent of black women in the 1919 study, in fact, had either never heard of unions or had never been asked to join.[77] Of the latter group, some claimed that bad experiences with prejudiced union officials and suspicions about their sincerity had influenced their decisions not to join.[78] As one woman stated: "why should I join the union now and pay dues. The union never bothered about me before."[79] Black women, then, knew little about unions because organizers were not particularly concerned with helping them.

Many unions did not overtly discriminate against black women, but nor did they actively recruit black members for a number of years. Undoubtedly, union officials viewed black women as temporary workers, both because they were women and would presumably marry and leave the workforce and because they were hired as a last resort to fill the void left during the war and would be the first to be fired. Abraham Baroff, from the ILGWU, attempted to use the black press as a vehicle to show that the union desired black members. He told a *New York Age* reporter that black women were welcome in the union and would be recruited in large numbers:

> They believe that if they can flood the market with cheap labor their difficulties will be solved. But I am sure we can make Negroes good union members as quickly as the employers bring them here. The Negro women in the garment trade join the union as soon as they learn the aims of the organization ... I believe that there is a possibility that Negroes may displace a large number of white workers in the

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[77] Consumer's League of the City of New York, *A New Day for the Colored Woman*, 23-24.

[78] *Ibid.*

[79] Paul, "Negro Women in Industry," 42.

> garment industry, but the union will not discriminate. We will not endeavor in any way to keep the Jews now in the trade from being displaced by Negroes. The negroes are as welcome in the garment trade as anyone. We are doing our best to keep race prejudice out of the labor unions.[80]

Baroff was so obvious in his desire to show the black community that the union did not discriminate that he said that they would back up black women, even if forcing Jewish union members out of the trade. Some black women, desiring the privileges that being a union member afforded them, were forced to pass themselves off as whites in order to join, which illustrates that Baroff was not entirely correct. Ironically, while unions were indifferent to organizing black women, there were no language barriers to overcome because black women workers spoke English.[81] Thus, organizing black women would have been simpler than organizing Jewish and Italian women in some respects. It was extremely difficult for black women to be accepted by organizers as permanent workers needing the protection of the union.

Since black women were often excluded from unions, many felt that they should not support the cause of unions. During labor disputes in the early 1920s, black women were still often used as strikebreakers in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. In a Philadelphia women's dress strike in 1921, for example, employers replaced the strikers with black women workers which lost the strike for the union. These black women, however, did not retain these positions after the union lost the strike as the employers preferred white labor, and therefore gained little.[82] In a strike five years later, black women employed in the shop refused to join white trade unionists. One woman explained that she was only working until her husband established himself as a pharmacist, and another actually recruited nine black strikebreakers who did not keep their positions after the strike.[83] In many other cases, though, the same local did receive support from black women in the shops.[84] Theresa Wolfson cited an example of a 1924 strike in which Italian and black women in one shop were asked to strike, and assigned a Jewish organizer who spoke English very poorly. The result was disastrous:

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[80] *New York Age*, 8 September 1923, 1.

[81] There were likely a handful of black women immigrants from the Caribbean who did not speak English, but the vast majority did.

> The Italian girls did not understand him, nor did the Negro girls. They refused to come out on strike, and when the organizer began to bully them, they became even more adamant. That particular shop never joined the strike.[85]

Many black women did not join unions because they felt that they had no common cause with organizers and coworkers.

Once the unions made more conscious attempts to recruit black women they began to use special methods to reach out to them. Many black women articulated that their work was so physically demanding that they were incapable of attending lectures, classes, or meetings, all of which the WTUL had organized to reach out to Jewish and Italian women with a measure of success. As one woman stated: "If I go out at night I go somewhere where there is lots of life and lots of fun; I'd go to sleep if I went to a lecture or a club meeting."[86] Some women were interested in union activities, especially classes in trade unionism, such as officer's training, and occupational training courses, like pattern making. These women were mainly single as the married women had too many family duties to attend to.[87] Since such a high percentage of black women worked after they married, organizers needed to find ways of appealing to these women that would not take time away from their busy schedules.

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[82] Paul, "Negro Women in Industry," 28.

[83] National Urban League, *Negro Membership in American Labor Unions*, 72.

[84] *Ibid.*, 31.

[85] Wolfson, *The Woman Worker and the Trade Unions*, 135.

Organizers who had achieved a great deal of success in organizing Italian women by using Italian organizers found that the same principles held true with black women. Nora Newsome, an organizer for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, found in her work that black women strongly distrusted white organizers. In one shop, for example, an Italian organizer spoke to the women, but the majority of black women would not listen to his speech about trade unionism and the others "would listen courteously but remain unorganized."[88] Newsome explained to this Italian organizer that "Negroes bitterly distrusted white people and had no faith in their promises" due to the "centuries of cruel treatment" they had received.[89] Newsome later found that she was, as a black women, received well in shops and achieved some results because "[t]hey felt, and rightly so, that a colored woman knew more than a white man possibly could about the specific ills from which their group suffered."[90] In the late 1920s, the ILGWU appointed a black woman, Floria Pinckney, as an organizer and she pledged to have 600 new black members within a year, although the extent of her success was not documented.[91] Italian women had responded to male organizers provided they were Italian because they were strongly influenced by men in their community. Black women, though, did not have the same family structures as Italian women, and demanded organizers of the same ethnicity and gender.

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[86] U.S. Department of Labor, *Negro Women in Industry*, 54.

[87] Paul, "Negro Women in Industry," 34.

[88] Newsome, "The Negro Woman in the Trade Union Movement," 761.

[89] *Ibid.* By the 1920s, less West Indians entered the garment trades due to restricted immigration, and more black women from the South and from New York entered garment shops.

Throughout the 1920s, these ideas regarding organizing black women were formulated and some gains had been realized. The ILGWU had a membership drive in the New York dress industries during a strike in 1929-30, and "went out of their way" to unionize black women.[92] They employed a black organizer, gave the organizer space for a headquarters, and launched an educational campaign in black neighbourhoods in cooperation with the YMCA and the NAACP. The campaign was deemed to be extremely successful since the black membership increased from 300 to 950.[93] Organizers believed that black women who did not join would have if their white coworkers had done so. These efforts were extraordinary because there was only 2,000 black women among the 40,000 workers in the New York garment industries .[94] The loyalty of black women to the ILGWU was shown during the campaign of leftist forces to gain the leadership of the union based on charges that the executive discriminated against black women. A number of black women denied these charges:

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[90] *Ibid.*

[91] National Urban League, *Negro Membership in American Trade Unions*, 73.

[92] Spero and Harris, *The Negro and the Labor Movement*, 143.

[93] *Ibid.*, 342.

[94] *Ibid.*

> "I was elected shop chairman in an all-white shop," said one girl. "The union organized every colored girl in my shop and treated them just like the white," said another. "The union made the boss stop discriminating against us," said a third. "The union called a strike to reinstate me."[95]

While these accounts may be exaggerated, they serve as illustrations that at least a few black women did not feel that the union discriminated against them and believed that the union could actually perform valuable services for them.

Bidding on the part of black women to better their industrial conditions met with strong opposition from employers. The Consumer's League of Eastern Pennsylvania reported in their study that black women working as pressers in a factory who decided to unionize were overheard by a foreman and told they would be discharged if they did and their jobs would be given to "white girls." One woman who continued to agitate was fired, though the union pressured the employer to re-hire her.[96] The forewomen in another shop swayed their charges not to join, as this woman explained:

> We were dumb then. We just didn't know anything. Why maybe if we had joined it would be better for us now. But we were scared to join because we might lose our jobs. We were dumb. We thought we couldn't join because our foreladies said we wouldn't be able to join unless they were union members. They weren't union members and they wouldn't join. We believed them then. We just didn't know any better.[97]

Hence, although the women in this shop recognized the value of unions, they were manipulated into not joining. As black women began to unionize, employers became disinterested in hiring or keeping on black employees, desiring white workers instead. One employer, who locked out his black employees, offered to settle with the union if the union would provide him with white workers. The union refused and called an all-out strike.[98]

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[95] *Ibid.*

[96] Consumer's League of Eastern Pennsylvania, *Colored Women As Industrial Workers in Philadelphia*, 27.

[97] Paul, "Negro Women in Industry," 42.

The fact that black women worked for lower wages and did not usually unionize was exploited by employers seeking to divide their workers, much as they had done when predominantly Italian and Jewish women worked in the factories. During a dress strike in 1921, for example, employers filled their shops with black strikebreakers and the strikers became quite concerned that they would be displaced permanently. Strikers and strikebreakers consequently fought intensely using scissors and pins as weapons. Employers attempted to "give the clashes an interracial rather than industrial color," in order to strengthen the resolve of the strikebreakers. Their methods only failed because the city assigned black police to the shops where black women were working to help dissipate the hostilities.[99] On one level, white workers felt some resentment towards their black coworkers.

When working together in the shops black women generally got along with their coworkers. Employers reported that half of their other workers felt no prejudice towards black women and, out of the other half, some were initially prejudiced but the feelings diminished over time. As one employer stated: "When the colored girls first came I had to be continually on the job to settle disputes, now I have no trouble."[100] Some white workers preferred segregation, while others did not object to black women working in the unskilled trades. Seventy-eight percent of the black women surveyed stated that their relations with coworkers were cordial and hostilities only arose when the work was piecework and there was insufficient work for all employees.[101] Those employers who did not segregate their workers did so for a variety of stated reasons, among them to promote understanding between different groups.[102] Ironically, it was found by union organizers that in integrated shops where black women were few in number, they mingled freely with coworkers and tended to "absorb" their points of view with respect to unions.[103]

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[98] Spero and Harris, *The Negro and the Labor Movement*, 338.

[99] *Ibid.*, 339.

Employers found it far better, however, to appoint forewomen of the same ethnic background as their charges. They found overwhelmingly that, although racial tensions did not really exist when a white forewoman oversaw black workers, the workers were far more productive with a black forewoman. One manager hired a white forewoman during the absence of the black forewoman with some intention of retaining her services permanently. The replacement forewoman was wholly unsuccessful in inspiring the women to work and "everything became so chaotic that he was most glad to welcome the Negro forewoman back."[104] Another employer found his black workers to be more interested, comfortable, energetic, and inspired towards the greatest efficiency due to the efforts of his black forewoman.[105] So, while black women expressed that they got along with their white coworkers, they did prefer to be supervised by a black forewoman.

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[100] Consumer's League of Eastern Pennsylvania, *Colored Women as Industrial Workers*, 42.

[101] Consumer's League of the City of New York, *A New Day for the Colored Woman*, 29.

[102] U.S. Department of Labor, *Negro Women in Industry*, 45.

[103] Spero and Harris, *The Negro and the American Labor Movement*, 344.

[104] U.S. Department of Labor, *Negro Women in Industry*, 46.

Early in the century, black women were overwhelmingly concentrated in domestic service positions in New York City which demanded long hours under variable working conditions.[106] They found it exceptionally difficult to break into the higher paying garment trades, and did so only because the war created a shortage of unskilled workers, and because employers often recruited them as strikebreakers and sometimes kept them on at the strike's conclusion. Black women were not usually hired if white workers were available and many lost their positions early in the 1920s when wartime prosperity came to a close. Employers cited many problems with the work performance of black women, but it seems more likely that prejudice played a major part in the decisions of those who chose not to retain the services of black employees. The chief value of the black worker, in the eyes of those who did continue to hire them, was the fact that they were not unionized and could be exploited. Black women were paid less and often worked under worse conditions than their coworkers, mainly because the unions were disinterested in recruiting them. By the end of the 1920s, slow progress was being seen on the part of union officials who began to realize that black women would continue to be employed in the garment trades at wages that undercut those of white workers. Special attention was given to finding black women organizers to meet the needs of these women. Thus, the process of recognizing black women as permanent additions to the workforce and protecting their interests through unions met with far more obstacles than did the means by which Italian women gained acceptance. It is difficult to ascertain what black women garment workers actually felt on a personal level since their individual views have never been recorded. While there are many primary sources available, they filter the lives and experiences of black working women through the medium of each author's own middle class values. Clearly, while black women faced many of the same burdens as Jewish and Italian women such as poor living and working conditions, poverty, and sickness, black women experienced more discrimination in the workforce and in unions.

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[105] *Ibid.*, 46.

[106] Even as late as 1960, over fifty percent of domestic workers in the United States were black women according to Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Survival Strategies Among African American Women," 141.

Conclusion

Immigration patterns largely influenced the composition of the workforce in the garment trades. Jewish women, being the first group to immigrate in substantial numbers, could be found working in garment shops by the end of the nineteenth century. Italian women then entered the garment trades during the large Italian migrations to New York City in the first decade of the twentieth century. Black women, mainly West Indian immigrants, were unable to gain employment in the garment shops until World War I created a labor shortage and Italian women began to unionize, thus depriving employers of a cheap pool of labor. These West Indian women overcame the discriminatory hiring practices of employers due to their lighter skin color and the fact that they had accents which could be attributed to Spanish or Italian ancestry. By the 1920s, however, black women who were native to the United States were hired in small numbers due to restricted immigration from the West Indies. The struggles of these women to unionize for better pay and working conditions likewise followed the same chronological pattern.

The primary and secondary scholarship on women in the New York garment trades has focused largely on the contributions of Jewish women to the labor movement. These Jewish women had involvement in or knowledge of unions in their homelands and were sometimes even formally trained in labor theory at Socialist schools. With the assistance of Rose Schneiderman, who was a Jewish working-class woman herself, Jewish women drew upon their past experiences in unions in the shirtwaist makers' strike and subsequent strikes. The shirtwaist makers' strike witnessed the emergence of a number of Jewish women leaders, the most celebrated being Clara Lemlich, who led their striking sisters into a new era of women's labor activism.

By supplementing the more traditional primary documents, like newspaper and magazine articles, on immigrant women with the City University of New York interviews, this thesis has deconstructed the conventional view that Jewish women were active unionists while Italian women were more passive. The WTUL members, employers, and writers on immigrant women, both contemporary and present day, have largely created this dichotomy based on the fact that few of these people were actually able to communicate with Italian women and see their points of view. Two ideas have emerged vividly from these interviews: that Italian women could be as militant in labor disputes as Jewish women, and that Italian and Jewish women led more or less parallel lives.

Italian women, who found positions in the garment trades later than Jewish women, also entered the union just after Jewish women did. While Jewish women had a full time organizer by 1908, Italian women did not have the assistance of an effective, full time organizer until the shirtwaist makers' strike. During the strike and especially once the Triangle Fire highlighted the need for more protection for workers, Italian women organized under their own terms. The Lawrence and white goods' strikes illustrated the value that Italian women placed upon having Italian organizers who spoke their language and understood their special needs as women and Italians. The increased intensity of Italian women's activism after 1911 was partly tied into the involvement of the men in their lives, husbands, fathers, and brothers, especially in Lawrence where men and women picketed side by side. Their high levels of participation in unions were mainly influenced, however, by the emergence of Italian women leaders like Clara Massilotti and Angelina Wanderling and other lesser known figures. Their experiences in unionizing thus followed more or less the same path as Jewish women's activism. The similar experiences which Jewish and Italian women shared in terms of work and the unions was also extended into their everyday lives.

Jewish and Italian women's lives, in the workplace and beyond, were defined by the fact that they were working-class immigrant women. They were both constrained culturally with respect to obtaining more than a basic education because women's education was not valued. Jewish and Italian women entered the garment trades in hopes of improving their fine sewing skills, but became disillusioned by the monotony of the work. Still, each woman worked both in order to fulfill her role as a good daughter and contribute to her family's earnings, and sometimes to achieve a small measure of independence.

In the course of living and working together under the same conditions, Jewish and Italian women often developed close bonds with one another. It was so important to these women that they at least attain a basic level of communication with coworkers that they used signals and struggled to communicate in a mixture of languages. The poverty and isolation that they felt in the bewildering new environment of New York City thus reinforced how much they needed one another for support. The acts of kindness between Jewish and Italian neighbours, which ranged from assisting a woman with meal preparation to finding a priest to administer the final rites to her dying child, illustrated that physical closeness did foster a deeper intimacy in spite of language differences. To reiterate Angelina Wanderling's words, "They would exchange the way they knew and then the heart would speak."[1]

Black women garment workers fit into this dynamic in a unique way. Seeking wage equality with their Jewish and Italian sisters, black women sometimes resorted to strikebreaking to find positions in the garment trades, but strikebreaking became less common as more black women found employment in factories. As they gradually found positions in the garment trades, they faced great discrimination from employers who saw them as less adequate workers, and union officials who were uninterested in helping black women workers until they formed a threat to other workers by strikebreaking or undercutting the wages. The obstacles which black women faced in their efforts to unionize slowed the process substantially, and it was not until the 1950s that black women went through the same period of labor activism as Jewish and Italian women did between 1910 and 1913.

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[1] Interview with Angelina Wanderling.

Employers and organizers assumed that there were differences between black women, and Italian and Jewish women simply based on differences in color. Black women did share some common experiences with Jewish and Italian, whether they were immigrants from the West Indies or had migrated from the Southern United States, because they too lived under similar circumstances as defined by their class and gender. While their wages and the conditions under which they worked were generally worse than those of Jewish and Italian women, all three groups of women suffered under poor conditions and labored for low wages. They lived in comparable situations, although black women were usually isolated from other ethnic groups because they were relegated to specific neighbourhoods and tenements. Jewish, Italian, and black women also worked within their homes after marriage, although it was not culturally defined that black women do so. Communication in the workplace was difficult due to language differences and the fact that black women were often segregated from their coworkers. As a result, Jewish and Italian women spoke little of black women in the interviews, and only three black women were interviewed in the project. The experiences of Italian women in the workplace and in labor unions have finally become clearer to us now because they have had the opportunity to speak about their lives. While much information about black women can be derived from reports and articles, one can only surmise what they actually thought: whether they believed that they were discriminated against, whether they identified those similarities between their lives and those of Jewish and Italian women, and how they felt about their lives in general.

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